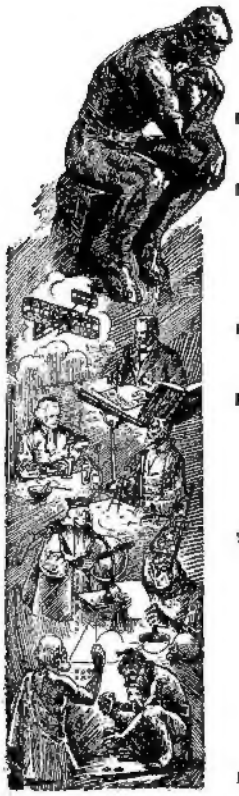
OTHER WORLDS
SCIENCE STORIES
MAY
35¢
THE SERPENT RIVER
Don Wilcox
FALCONS OF NARABEDLA
Marion Z. Bradley
NEW LAMPS
Robert M. Williams



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A long time ago there was a peddler who went around exchanging new lamps for old — Les Ro was like that, but he exchanged new lives for old. And the price . . . ?

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Adric traveled the Time Ellipse, and it plunged Mike Kenscott into a strange world of two suns, the Keep of the Dreamer, and the strange falcons of Narabedla.

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Can you imagine a serpent so huge that it flowed around a planet like a giant living river? And would you dare to ride it to . . . the land of happiness?

Front cover painting by Ray Palmer

Adapted from a black-and-white illustration by Malcolm Smith depicting a scene in Shaver's Caves

Photos from the movies, "Fire Maidens of Outer Space" and "The Mole People".

OTHER WORLDS SCIENCE STORIES

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....Editorial...

We know now how it feels to win a gold medal in the Olympics! OTHER WORLDS, after a couple of years of slugging it out with the times, has finally won its gold medal . . . or what seems to us to be its equivalent; for with one big smash it has attained all its goals! We think you'll be tickled as we recite these achievements and explain what they will mean to you for your future pleasure. In the first place we are (1) "the most readable magazine in the science fiction field," and this has two aspects (a) the finest stories obtainable anywhere, and (b) our new readable type is a howling success. (2) We are increasing our frequency to monthly publication. From now on, you'll get your favorite magazine every month . . . which should be a pleasant surprise! (3) We are making a slight change in our title. From the next issue on (June), we will change from **OTHER WORLDS Science Stories** to "FLYING SAUCERS FROM OTHER WORLDS". This title change needs a little explaining, and in the first place, no need to fear that it means a change in the wonderful stories you've been getting in recent months — as a matter of fact, future stories will be even better, in the best science fiction tradition. But we are **adding** a kind of science fiction which we think has become a permanent part of our world literary scene, the story that deals with the **new** kind of spaceship. After all, it's just not modern to talk of spaceships these days, or of Bob Crosby; but of flying saucers and Elvis Presley! You've seen the movies, and you know that every time a ship crosses the void in these new modern science fiction times, it's a **disk**! Well, we'll just have disk ships now, instead of the old - fashioned "after - burners." Sounds reasonable, eh?

But that's not all. Flying saucers have become an important part of our daily thinking, and in OTHER WORLDS, we're going to sort of divvy up our issues, stressing first our usual science fiction, and then the next issue, the flying saucer phase of science fiction. We're going to try to indicate this by a slightly different logotype on alternate issues, by the simple means of stressing one month the words OTHER WORLDS and the next FLYING SAUCERS. But the **full** title of the magazine will be **Flying Saucers from** OTHER WORLDS or FLYING SAUCERS **From Other Worlds.**

To tell you we've got some very fine flying saucer science fiction novels and novelettes on hand will be superfluous — you ought to know we wouldn't broaden our scope without having something to fill those new horizons. So, just watch for the June issue, and the beginning of the saga of the disk ships! One of the features will be our Scientifilm Movie Expert Forrie Ackerman's tremendous feature article on flying saucer movies. There'll be plenty of photos too. Among the other features will be some extremely timely and exciting fact articles, which OTHER WORLDS (pardon us, **Flying Saucers From** OTHER WORLDS)

will present as a regular attraction. Sometimes the truth is even stranger than fiction.

We hope you've noticed the new cover this month without too much surprise. Actually, as we write this, we don't know exactly how it is going to look. When your editor started out to be an artist he realized almost anything could result — so he just closed his eyes and plunged ahead — and let the rest up to the engravers and the printers. It may be that we'll drop dead when we see it ourselves, but then again, we might like it — or at least hope that you do. You might let us know what you think of your editor indulging in such experiments? One thing about it, we aren't hidebound by tradition — and we want to try many of the new effects and inventions the art world is developing these days, along with the printing industry and the chemists of the ink manufacturers.

Back in 1926, when we picked up the first issue of AMAZING STORIES, we experienced a pioneering sort of thrill — and science fiction has been that same kind of pioneering thrill to us ever since. Not one month has gone by without thinking of something with which to blaze a new trail. Sometimes we've hit it rich, and others we've flopped on our face. But when we start listing the successful new trails we've blazed, then we begin to realize that 31 years is a long time! And very few months have passed when there wasn't some new pioneering going on.

We sit and think of the authors we started on their careers. Not just dozens, but actually hundreds! And dozens of them today's top stars; and more, some who've gone on to really big things. They are big-time stars in the literary field, ranging from magazines to movies to TV — and even to serious novels. We started them out with pioneering ideas, and they blazed new trails that prospered our magazines almost incredibly.

Then there were the "stunts" we pulled. Greatest of all, perhaps, was the famous Shaver Mystery. We call this a "stunt", but not in the sense that it was not the real thing — because it was — but in the sense that it took a stunt-man technique to do it, and also a lot of just plain intestinal fortitude. It caused a fantastic ruckus. Even today, seven years after, we find such fans as Harlan Ellison appearing on a rather famous "wee small-hour" radio program (WOR), and setting the whole science fiction world in an uproar by claiming the Shaver Mystery was a hoax, and that your editor told him so. Harlan was one of the most vehement demanders that the Mystery be killed and that it was sheer blasphemy to science fiction to have introduced it —and now, he keeps trying to revive it. It all goes to prove that the Shaver Mystery **really had it,** when it's the only subject a modern-day writer can talk about that will get him on the air! We hear the radio station got indignant telegrams from everywhere. Your editor even got a letter from one fan who insisted that if we wanted Harlan bull-whipped, they'd be happy to drop down to his town and do it for us. Of course we said no, because actually Harlan is a nice guy, and we like him. The point is, this pioneering spirit of ours has always resulted in quite a bit of excitement, and we find it tremendously exhilarating. Science fiction has been and always will be a tremendous adventure. One of the

most interesting adventures of modern times is the flying saucer, and that is why we feel it should be included in our category.

We wonder how many of you readers know that at one time Project Blue Book (the Army Air Force's investigation into flying saucers) actually named your editor as the "hoaxer" who started this whole flying saucer thing, and specifically what is known today as "The Tacoma Incident". When the truth is told about that incident, if it ever is, it will shock the world. See what we mean about science fiction? It goes deeper than just a "story" in a magazine.

Today we are **living** the science fiction of yesterday, and now something new is being added — we are living **tomorrow's** science fiction too . . . ahead of time! Flying saucers are real. The **what** and the **why** and the **how** are just as mysterious as ever, and certainly the **where** is a mystery. In 1945 Shaver told us of the flying saucers, and predicted them. In 1947 they appeared the world over! No wonder Shaver was a Mystery! Three days before Nikola Tesla died, Shaver predicted it. No wonder Shaver was a Mystery!

Yes, science fiction is an adventure! A thrilling, blood-gripping act going on right on the pages of today's history, and only thinly disguised as fiction. And now, with the new OTHER WORLDS, we think a new chapter in a very exciting drama is about to be written. We have that unexplainable feeling we always get when something big is about to break. We were "in on" the flying saucer mystery, before it broke. We were "with it" all the way through to today. We had the good fortune to have hundreds of sources of information denied even the best of the intelligence services. We beat them all to the punch on many new developments, and sometimes actually beat them to the scene of exciting saucer events. In one adventure, the Tacoma Incident, **seven men died** under extremely mysterious circumstances. If you think the curse of King Tut's tomb was potent, it was child's play beside the Tacoma Flying Disk Incident. A hoax? If so, a pretty grim one! It was no joke to Kenneth Arnold to find our warning to him over the phone of a crash of his plane 100% justified — and under circumstances he claims today are impossible to understand, and wholly illogical.

Yes, science fiction is an adventure. And it is only in the pages of OTHER WORLDS that you find it really **lived** by everybody, from its editor down to the last reader.

A lot of science fiction in the past five years was diverted to fields into which it never deserved to be pushed. (What English!) The psychological (whatever is logical about a psycho!) field, for instance. The psychological story existed long before science fiction, and in fact was more suited to the Elizabethan age, and Edgar Allen Poe. As for "shocking" the modern reader, you can't do it with vague droolings which strive to imply when there is nothing to imply. We started with the rocketship, the spaceship, roaring up off the earth to wild and wonderful adventures on other planets and among the stars, and in the vast waste-void between. Now we have arrived at the flying saucer, reversing the field, **repaying** our visit. We went out to them in fiction — they have come back to us in fact!

So, that is why we are making this new advance in **OTHER WORLDS.**

—Rap.

NEW LAMPS

By Robert Moore Williams

Ronson came to the Red Planet on the strangest mission of all . . . he only knew he wanted to see Les Ro, but he didn't know exactly why. It was because he knew that Les Ro had the answer to something that had never been answered before, if indeed, it had ever been asked! For Les Ro traded new lamps for old — and they were the lamps of life itself!

On Mars, the dust is yellow, and microscopically fine. With the result that it penetrates to the sensitive lung tissues of a human being, causing distress. Crossing the street toward the dive set into the towering wall of the cliff overhead, Jim Ronson sneezed violently. He wished fervidly that he might get another glimpse of what Robert Heinlein, two centuries before, had nostalgically called **The Cool Green Hills of Earth**, and again smell air that had no dust in it. Deep inside of him a small voice whispered that he would be very lucky if he ever saw the green hills of Earth again.

Somewhere ahead of him, in the granite core of the mountain, was something that no human had ever seen. Rumors of what was here had reached Jim Ronson. They had been sufficiently exciting to lift him out of an Earth laboratory and to bring him on a space ship to Mars, feverishly sleep-learning the Martian language as he made the hop, to investigate what might be here in this granite mountain near the south pole of the Red Planet. Some Martians knew what was here. In Mars Port, Ronson had talked to one who obviously knew. But the Martian either could not or would not tell what he knew.

Across the street, squatting against the wall, were a dozen Martians. One was segregated from the rest. They watched the human get out of the **dothar** drawn cart that had brought him from the jet taxi that had landed on the sand outside this village, pay his fare, and come toward them. Taking a half-hitch around his courage, Ronson moved past them. He glanced down at the one sitting apart from the rest, then averted his eyes, unease and discomfort rising in him. The Martian was a leper. Ronson forced himself to look again. The sores were clearly visible, the eyes were dull

From the movie "Five Maidens Of Outer Space" starring Anthony Dexter, Gloria Oliver. Paul Carpenter.

Jennie Ware gave a quick cry . . . out of the dark opacity a figure came. There was not a sound in the huge room. It was the Martian Messenger.

and apathetic, without hope. As if some of the leper's hopelessness were communicated to him, Ronson felt a touch of despair. In this place, if the rumors were true, how could there be a leper? How- - He paused as one of the Martians squatting on the sidewalk rose to bar his way.

On the Red Planet, humans were

strictly on their own. If they got themselves into trouble, no consular agent was available to help them. If they got killed, no representative of Earth law came to ask why or to bring the killers to human justice. No amount of argument or persuasion on the part of delegates from Earth had ever produced a treaty guaranteeing the lives or even the safety of humans who went beyond the limits of Mars Port. The Martians simply could not see any reason for protecting these strange creatures who had come uninvited across space. Let humans look out for themselves!

The Martian who rose in front of Ronson was big and looked mean. Four knives hung from the belt circling his waist. Ronson did not doubt that the fellow could stab very expertly with the knives or that he could throw them with the accuracy of a bullet within a range of thirty feet. In the side pocket of the heavy **dothar**-skin coat that he wore, Ronson had a **zen** gun which he had purchased before leaving Mars Port. The little weapon threw an explosive bullet guaranteed to change forever the mind of any human or any Martian who got in the way of it. Ronson did not doubt that he could draw and fire the gun before the Martian could use one of the knives but he also knew that he did not want to start a fight here in the street. What was inside the mountain was too important to risk.

"Happy wind time," Ronson said. This greeting was good manners anywhere on Mars. He bowed to the Martian. As he bowed, the fellow snatched his hat, held it aloft as a trophy.

Laughter echoed through the watching Martians. Only the leper was unmoved. The Martian put the hat on his own head, where it sank down over his ears. He wiggled his scalp and the hat danced. The laughter grew stronger.

Ronson kept his temper. "I'll take my hat back," he said, politely.

"Ho!" the Martian said. "Try and get it."

"I want my hat back." Ronson said, a little less politely. Inside, he was coming to a boil. Like a stupid child, this Martian was playing a silly game. To them, this was fun. To the human, it was not fun. A wrong move on his part, or even no move, and they might be on him like wolves, endangering the purpose that had brought him here. Or had Les Ro, catching wind somehow of his visit, set these stupid creatures across his path? At the thought, the anger rising inside of him became a feeling of cold.

"I want - -"

Another squatting Martian rose. "I'll take his coat," the second one announced.

A third was rising. "Me for his breeks!"

They were going to disrobe him, strip him naked, for the sake of his clothes. Ronson did not in the least doubt that they would do it, or try to do it. The only law protecting humans on this planet was what they could make up as individuals and enforce for themselves. He reached for the gun in the side pocket of the **dothar** skin coat.

The Martian who had taken his hat reached out and grabbed his arm. The fellow had steel claws for hands instead of flesh and blood. The claws clamped over Ronson's arm with a paralyzing grip that seemed to squeeze the very nerves in their sheaths.

Ronson slugged with his left fist, very hard and very fast, a blow that landed flush on the jaw of the Mar-

tian. The fellow blinked but was not damaged. He grinned. "Ho! Human wants to fight!" He seemed to find satisfaction in the idea. He reached out with his other hand, grasping for Ronson's neck this time.

Ronson had not been in a rough and tumble fight since he was a kid but he discovered that he had not forgotten how to bring up his knee and jab his antagonist in the stomach. Only this time it didn't work. The Martian brought down an elbow and deflected the rising leg. His groping fingers found Ronson's neck, closed there with a grip that was as tight as the grip around the human's right arm. The other Martians drew closer. As soon as Te Hold had subdued this alien. they intended to have his clothes right down to the skin. Maybe they would take the skin too, if they could find any value in it. They were so engrossed in watching Te Hold tame this human that they did not notice the door of the joint open behind them. Nor did they see the girl come out.

She was not in the least surprised at the fight in the street, nor was she in any doubt as to what to do about it. In her hand, she had a spring gun, one of those little weapons that are spring powered and which throw steel needles coated with the extremely powerful synthetic narcotic, thormoline. Hardly seeming to take aim, she shot the Martian who was holding Ronson in the back. Te Hold jumped as the needle stung him but he did not let go of Ronson. The spring gun pinged again as the girl put another needle in his back.

Te Hold jumped again. He released his grip on Ronson's throat. The human gulped air, and slugged Te Hold again, harder this time. The fast-acting narcotic was already taking effect. Te Hold went over like a falling tree.

Jim Ronson snatched the zen gun from his pocket, then saw that he did not need it. The girl had been busy with the needle weapon. Two of the Martians were also down and the rest were in full flight, except the leper, who had not moved. Standing in front of the door, the girl was calmly shooting needles at their legs as they ran.

Not until then did Ronson really see the girl. He blinked startled eyes at her. Human women were rare on Mars, here in this place near the south pole they should not exist at all. No woman in her right mind would come here. But one was here, and a darned attractive one at that. She was tall, lithe, and full breasted. The hair peeping out from under the tight fitting-helmet was a shade of red. If she had a fault in her figure, it was the fact that her hips were too narrow--she was as slender as a boy--but Ronson was not inclined to criticize her for that. Not when she had just saved his clothes and maybe his life.

As the last Martian dodged around the corner, she turned her attention to him. A smile lit her face.

"Dr. Ronson! A privilege to meet you, sir." Hand outstretched, smiling, she moved around the victims of her needle gun and came toward him.

Ronson stared at her in bewildered consternation. He had not thought that anyone on Mars would even know his name, he had not wanted anyone to know his identity. Especially not in this place. He barely remembered his maners in time to take the hand offered him.

"I'm Jennie Ware," the girl said.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Ware." Where had he heard or seen this name before? "I want -- ah -- to thank you for helping me out of a spot."

"It was nothing," she said smiling. "Always glad to help my fellow men."

"You certainly went into action fast." He glanced at Te Hold, sleeping in the street. On the sidewalk near the corner, another Martian was taking a nap. Only the leper was still in sight and awake.

"I had these needles coated with a special narcotic designed to affect the Martian nervous system. As to my going into action fast. I've discovered that you have to be firm with these Martians," she answered smiling.

Stooping, he retrieved his hat. "How did you know me?"

A little flicker of amusement showed in his eyes. "Why shouldn't I recognize Earth's foremost biophysicist and leading authority on cellular structure? Come on in. I'll buy you a drink. You'll love this place. They've even got a waiter who thinks he can speak English."

"Thanks," Ronson said. "I'll take you up on that." He was astonished and bewildered by this woman. He had spent most of his life in the laboratories of Earth. The women who had been there had been flat-breasted, pale creatures in low-heeled shoes who had called him "Sir," and "Doctor," and who had obviously been greatly in awe of him but who had apparently never had a red-blooded thought in their lives. He had regarded them as a sort of neuter sex, creatures who had obviously been intended by nature to be female but who had gotten their hormones mixed up somewhere along the line. This girl was different.

Her name, somehow, had a haunting familiarity, as if he had heard it somewhere before. But he couldn't remember where.

She went through the door ahead of him. As Ronson passed through, a Martian thrust his head around the corner outside and threw a knife. The steel blade buried in the door facing within six inches of the human's head. He hastily ducked through the door.

Looking annoyed, the girl started back to the street outside. "I'll fix him," she said, pulling the needle gun.

Ronson caught her shoulder. "Let well enough alone," he said firmly. "Anyhow you were going to buy me a drink."

Her eyes held a curious mixture of annoyance, defiance, and longing. Her gaze went down to his hand on her shoulder. Ronson grinned at her. "You look as if you are about to bite me," he said. "Go ahead, if you want to." He did not move his hand.

Wonder came into her face. "A great many men have tried to paw me, without getting very far. But somehow, I don't think you're trying to do that."

"About that drink?" Ronson said.

"Sure." She moved toward a table set against the far wall.

Ronson dared to breathe again. Whatever else this girl was, she was certainly full of fight and fury. She could have gone out into the street, in the face of thrown knives, if he hadn't stopped her. As she moved toward the table, he had a chance to look at the place in which he found himself.

What he saw was not reassuring. Except for a big circle in the center of the room, the place was crammed with Martian males of all sizes and descriptions. Waiters scurried

through the crowd. The circle on the floor was outlined in red. No customer and no Martian ventured within it. Ronson glanced at it, asked the girl a question.

"I just got here too," she said. "I haven't had time to find out about it. Some superstition of their's, I think." She led him to the table. Two glasses were already on it. A waiter appeared out of nowhere. "This is the one who speaks English. Talk to the gentleman, Tocko."

"Oh, yessen, missen. Me talken ze English and but very gooden. Me learnen ze human talken at Mars Porten. Don't I talk him gooden?" The last was directed at Ronson.

"You speak him very wonderfullen," Ronson answered. The waiter beamed.

"Bring the gentleman a mariwaukee," the girl said.

"Oh, yessen, missen."

"On second thought, make it a double shot," the girl said. "The gentleman looks like he needs it." She nodded brightly to Ronson as if she had selected the very medicine he needed. "Now tell me what you are doing on Mars, Dr Ronson?"

Ronson glanced hastily at the waiter, to make certain that he was out of earshot. "I -- I came here on a vacation," he said firmly and loudly. "I've wanted to see Mars ever since I was a kid. Who - - ah - - was sitting here with you before I came?"

"A man," she answered. "He went to the little boy's room just before you got into trouble in the street. I guess he's still there, if some Martian hasn't slit his throat. Are you enjoying your vacation?"

"Of course."

" Do you mind if I call you Jim?" She smiled at him.

"I would be very pleased."

"Good. You can call me Jennie."

"Thanks."

"Then you are enjoying your vacation." Her smile was very sweet. "Are you also enjoying trying to lie to me - - Jim?"

Ronson caught his start of surprise. Jennie Ware bewildered him but this was a game that two could play. "Of course I'm enjoying it. Lying to a woman as beautiful as you are is always a pleasure - - Jennie." He grinned at her and watched the anger come up on her face. Why should she be angry?

The anger was gone as swiftly as it had come. She leaned across the table, put her hand on his. "I like you Jim. I really do. And not because you called me a beautiful woman but because you kicked me in the teeth with my own act. I had it coming and you gave it to me very neatly."

The touch of her hand was very pleasant. "No hard feelings. What - - ah - - are you doing here, Jennie?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "I'm on a vacation too, Jim."

"Touche!" The females in the laboratories back on earth had never touched his hand or called him by his first name. He wondered about the man with whom she had been drinking. Also he was very uneasy about her real reason for being here. No woman with good sense would make the rough rocket trip to Mars for a vacation; presuming she did come to Mars, she would not willingly come to this place. But Jennie Ware was here, an enigma wrapped up in a beautiful smile. He took his eyes off her long enough to look around the place again.

In Mars Port, he had seen the native dives, but Mars Port had nothing like this. To the natives, this was a place of pleasure, filled with sights, sounds, and smells that made them happy. Over against the

farther wall a tribal chieftan was absorbing **narseeth** through the skin of his hands, thrusting them again and again into the sirupy, smoky-colored mixture in the bowl in front of him. Ever so often he stopped, whereupon the Martian female with him carefully dried his hands. After they were dry, he made fumbling passes at her She accepted the passes without resistance. Ronson stared at the sight.

"Relax. You'll get used to it," Jennie Ware said.

At another table a huge Martian was sitting. Two others were with him. One sat facing the rear, the other faced the front. Ronson had the impression of two alert dogs guarding thier master. A little chill passed through him at the thought.

Odors were in the place, of sweat dried into **dothar** skin garments, of stale drinks. Dim but distinct was the all-pervading clinging, cloying odor of **tamil**, the Martian equivalent of musk. Though an opening at the right, Ronson could see females lounging at ease in what was apparently a reception room to a brothel.

Unease came up in him again. How could this place be the way to Les Ro? But the rumors he had picked up and carefully checked in Mars Port had all been in agreement, if you wanted to see Les Ro, you came here. What happened after that was obviously fate.

Watching, Ronson saw that no Martian entered the circle on the floor.

He nodded toward the Martian females. "What do you think of this?"

"Oh, a girl has to live," she said, shrugging. "What do you think?"

"Oh, a Martian has to have fun, I suppose." His shrug was as indifferent as hers had been. For an instant, he thought she was going to spit at him.

The waiter arrived with the drink.

"I 'have putten you on ze listen," he said, confidentially, to Ronson.

"On the **listen**?"

"He means **list**." Jennie Ware said.

"What list?" Ronson asked

"On ze listen of zozen waiten to see ze great Les Ro," the waiter answered.

Inside of him, Ronson felt cold come up. Strictly on his own, he had to decide how he was going to handle this. He made up his mind on impulse. "Who the devil is Les Ro?"

Across the table, Jennie Ware lifted startled eyes toward Ronson. The waiter's face showed astonishment, then embarrassment, at the idea that anyone existed who had not heard of Les Ro, Ronson thought. "You do not knowen ze great Les Ro. He is ze greatest zinker, ze greatest doer, ze greatest - -"

"Stinker?" Jennie Ware said. "That sounds about right."

"You are maken ze kidden wiz me," the waiter said, indignation in his voice. "You have hearden of ze great Les Ro. You came here to see him. You musten haven. Everybody who comes here, comes to see him." The waiter spoke with authority.

"I'm sorry," Ronson said. "If he is that important, I would like to talk to him, of course. But do you mean all of these Martians are waiting to see him?" A wave of his hand indicated the group in the room.

The waiter, mollified, leered at Ronson. "Ze girls didn't. Ze girls come here for anuzzer purpose." The leering gesture included Jennie Ware in it. It said that obviously she had come here for the same purpose What other purpose was there?

The girl gasped. Fire shot from

From the movie "Fire Maidens Of Outer Space" starring Anthony Dexter Susan Shaw Paul Carpenter

To the Martian natives, this was a place of pleasure, filled with sights, sounds and smells—but behind it all there was danger.

her eyes. "I'll have you know - -"

"Shut up," Ronson said.

Fire flashed at him. "Hasn't it occurred to you that you are in danger of getting your pretty little throat slit if you talk out of turn here?" Ronson whispered.

"Even ze noffers outside are on se listen," the waiter added.

"What about me? Am I on it?" Jennie asked.

The waiter showed great astonishment. "But of course not. You are a female."

"What difference does that make?" This time the fire really shot from her eyes

"How long do you have to wait after you're on the listen?" Ronson hastily asked.

The waiter spread his hands and twisted his shoulders. "Who knows? Some of ze noffers outside have been waiting since last wind time - - "

"Almost an Earth year," Ronson said, calculating rapidly. Once during each circle of the sun the great winds blew across Mars This was the biggest natural event on the planet. Since it occurred with the regularity of clock work, it served as the starting point for their year.

"Sometimes ze great Les Ro call you right away," the waiter said.

"How will I know if I'm called?" Ronson said.

A shudder passed over the waiter. "You vill know. Of a most certain, you vill know. Ze Messenger vill call." The shudder came again. As if he had already said too much. the waiter hurried away Ronson turned back to Jennie Ware. She was

sparkling with fury.

"If they think they're going to keep me from seeing Les Ro just because I'm a woman - -"

"Why do you want to see him? He probably isn't pretty."

"Because I want to write a book about him."

"A book - -" Ronson's memory suddenly came alive and he remembered where he had seen her name before. He stared at her, startled and almost aghast Back on Earth, this woman was almost a legend. Every tabloid and every Sunday supplement had carried her picture and stories about her. The programs beamed to space had carried tales of her exploits. She had explored the depths of the Venusian jungles, she had ridden a **dothar** across half of Mars. When Deep Space Flight One had blasted off from Pluto, bound for the exploration of deep space, the news telecasts back to Earth had carried the information that a stowaway had been discovered and ejected from the ship just before blast off. No one had been surprised when this stowaway had turned out to be Jennie Ware. Subsequent rumors had whispered that she had practically torn Pluto Dome apart because she had been ejected from the ship. Even the fact that the ship had never returned had not cooled her anger.

In addition, she was also a very competent author. Ronson had read two of her books and had admired her deft touch with words and the deep sincerity that had showed through in even the most hard-boiled and raucous passages. Unquestionably Jennie Ware was a very unusual human being

But in spite of this, Ronson stared at her in growing horror. Her reputation across the solar system was that of an uninhibited vixen. Here in this place, where their lives might ride on the blinking of an eye-lash, or on not blinking it, a temper tantrum thrown by Jennie Ware - - or by anybody else - - was the last thing he wanted to see.

A tall figure loomed beside the table A deep voice asked, laughingly, "Well, Jim, since you've already met our lady authoress, how do you like her?"

Ronson looked up, then got up, his hand going out, a grin spurting to his face. The man standing there. Sam Crick, took the outstretched hand and grinned back at him.

Crick was tall and lean. His skin was tanned a deep brown, a color that had resulted from facing all the winds that had ever blown on Mars and all the sun that had ever shown there. Crick was something of a legend on the Red Planet. He was the eternal adventurer, the lonely wanderer of the waste place, the type of human who was always looking for something that lay just over the edge of the horizon.

Jim Ronson and Sam Crick had grown up together as boys on Earth. Ronson had gone into a laboratory, Crick had hopped a freighter bound for Mars. Ronson had not seen his old friend in many years, but he had heard from him and about him. A feeling of deep warmth came up inside the scientist at the sight of the tanned face grinning at him.

"Then you did get my space radio?" Ronson said. "I couldn't locate you in Mars Port and I was never sure." Relief at finding Crick here was a surging feeling deep within him With Crick here, he not only had a man experienced in Martian ways and customs to help him, but what was more important, he had a friend.

Crick's face lost its smile. Wrinkles showed on his forehead. "What

space radio, Jim?"

"The one I sent you, asking you to meet me here. Quit kidding me. If you didn't get my space radio, how does it happen that you're here? Don't tell me this is a coincidence."

Crick shook his head. A doleful expression appeared on his face. "I sure didn't get it, Jim. As to what I'm doing here, I'm chaperoning our lady authoress. Meet my boss." He nodded to Jennie Ware.

Ronson turned startled eyes toward the girl.

"I caught him flat broke in Mars Port just before you arrived," she answered. "Since he was broke, I took advantage of him and hired him as my bodyguard. Not that I would really need a bodyguard, but in case I fell and broke a leg, he might be handy. But his being here wasn't a coincidence."

"Eh?" Ronson said. It was difficult to follow her thinking. She seemed to say a lot, or nothing, all with the same words, the only difference being the voice tone she used. If she chose, she had all the gifts of a man in concealing her true feelings and real opinions.

Her voice was calm, her face expressionless. "The grapevine in Mars Port said the Earth's top-flight biophysicist was coming here, that old Les Ro was thought to have something that human scientists were all hotted up about, and that you were coming here to investigate, and to chisel Les Ro out of a piece of it, if he would stand still for such treatment."

Ronson blinked at her. She had delivered a bombshell and she had done it as if she thought what she said was of no importance: "I'm not trying to chisel Les Ro or anybody out of anything." His calm matched her aplomb.

"That's not the way the grapevine had it."

"I don't care how the grapevine had it. I know my own motives and my purpose in coming here." An edge crept into his voice as he realized one possible result of what she was saying.

"That may be true. But do the Martians know them?"

Ronson was silent, his thinking perturbed.

"So I hired Sam and came here," Jennie Ware continued. "If Les Ro was big enough to attract you, he was also big enough to provide me with copy for my next book."

"So you could find copy for a damned book, you risked my neck!" Ronson said, his voice hot.

"I didn't risk it a tenth as much as you're doing, by yelling at the top of your lungs where half of Mars can hear you. Anyhow, I saved your clothes and maybe your hide out in front a while ago. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Sorry," Ronson said abruptly. "I lost my temper."

"I'd like to make one point," Crick said. "We've got a mighty hot collection of thieves, crooks, and killers present in this joint."

Jennie Ware and Jim Ronson stared at him.

Crick gestured toward the Martian with the two guards. "That's Tal Bock. He belongs in the upper lentz country, where he is the leader of a gang of killers and thieves. The one over there soaking his hands in smoke is Kus Dorken. He's not any better than Tal Bock."

"What are they doing here?" the girl asked.

"I don't know," Crick answered. "Unless maybe they've been listening in on the grapevine too."

For a moment, it looked as if Jennie Ware was about to cry. She seemed, suddenly, to become a small

girl who had done something wrong and was very sorry for it and was trying to find some way to express her sorrow. Her hand came across the table again, touched Ronson's hand hesitantly.

"I'm sorry, Jim, if I got you into trouble. But I knew your reputation. If you were coming here, something big was here. I -- I wanted to be in on it. I guess all my life I've wanted to be in on something big. If I actually got you into trouble, Sam and I are here to help you get out of it. Isn't that right, Sam?"

"Right, Jennie." A growl sounded in the tall adventurer's voice. "Thanks, both of you," Ronson said. He was deeply touched. In spite of the shell of bravado that she wore, and her sudden spurting anger, he liked this girl. She might have the reputation of an uninhibited vixen, but somewhere inside of her was a small girl looking out from awed and wondering eyes at the vastness of the world.

"Watch it!" Crick's whisper was shrill and sharp. His eyes were focused on the ceiling.

All the sounds of the place, the rattle of glasses, the sharp giggling of soliciting women, the deep voices of the Martian males, had gone into sudden and complete silence. Like Crick, they were looking upward. Ronson followed their gaze to the ceiling. Jennie Ware gave a quick cry Glass tinkled and broke as she dropped her drink.

Jim Ronson did not hear the sound. His entire attention was focused on what was happening on the ceiling.

The dive itself had been cut into the side of the cliff. The solid rock of the ceiling had not been disguised or masked.

At first glance, Ronson thought his eyes were deceiving him. The solid stone itself seemed to be in motion. A sort of melting, shifting flow seemed to be taking place as if the molecules and perhaps even the atoms themselves were dissolving

"That's atomic disintegration, or atomic shifting, under control!" Sam Crick gasped.

"It's a mirage," Jennie Ware whispered. "It must be."

"If it's a mirage, everybody in the place is seeing it," Ronson said.

There was not a sound in the huge room. The waiters had come to attention like trained soldiers. The females had abruptly lost all interest in what they were doing. Out of the corner of his eyes, Ronson saw one female make a sudden darting movement across the room One foot touched the circle on the floor as she ran She took two more steps and fell, sagging downward as if every muscle in her body had suddenly refused to function. She lay on the floor without moving Not a head was turned toward her, not a Martian moved to help her. In her action Ronson saw one reason why the Martians avoided the circle on the floor. Something was definitely wrong with that circle. Looking at the roof, he saw the reason.

The flowing, shifting movement there had formed into a circle the same size as the circle on the floor and directly above it. Little flickers of light, like the discharge of high frequency currents, were flowing between the two circles. Swiftly the flickers of light became an opaque cylinder of misty flame extending from the ceiling to the floor.

From the opaque cylinder of light, a Martian stepped.

Without quite knowing how he knew it, Ronson knew that this was Les Ro's Messenger.

The Messenger was old, perhaps

as old as the granite mountain above them, if the network of fine wrinkles on his face were an accurate indication of his age. With age, calmness and serenity had come to this Martian. His eyes gave the impression that they had seen everything What they had not seen, the brain behind them had imagined. Peace was in the eyes and on the face, the deep peace that many human saints had sought and had found.

"I like him," Jennie Ware whispered.

The Messenger carried himself with a sureness that was full of meaning. He glanced around the room. His eyes settled on the three humans at the table. A sort of a glow appeared on his face, lighting it as if with a halo. He moved toward them, stopped and stood looking down at them. For a moment, his face was blank, and even his eyes seemed to be withdrawn.

"ESP!" Crick whispered. "Guard your thinking."

The eyes flicked toward Crick, then came to Ronson. The human felt a touch that was feather-light appear in his brain. It seemed to run like lightning through the nerve cells. Then it was withdrawn. The smile came back to the face of the Messenger.

"Les Ro has waited a long time for one like you, my son. He will see you." The voice was deep and pleasant. Somewhere in it were tones that were bell pure.

Ronson rose to his feet.

"Watch it!" Crick whispered. "This may not be on the up and up."

"I came here to see Les Ro," Ronson answered. "I'm not going to back out now. Which way do I go?" The last was spoken to the Messenger

The Martian bowed The wave of his hand indicated the cylinder of misty radiance flowing from the ceiling to the floor. "Just step into the light, my son."

"Jim!" Jennie's voice had a frantic plea in it.

"May my friends go with me?" Ronson said.

The Messenger shook his head. His face said he was very sorry but that the answer was no. "I have no instructions for them. Only you, my son. Les Ro has waited very long for someone like you."

Ronson did not know whether he was pleased or not. But he knew he was greatly excited. If the rumors had been right, if the grapevine had reported correctly, something was here in the heart of the Martian mountain that had never existed before in the solar system -- and perhaps not in the universe. He stepped boldly into the opaque radiance.

To Jennie Ware and Sam Crick it looked as if he had stepped out of existence.

To Jim Ronson, when he stepped into the light, it seemed to him that millions of tiny hands instantly grasped him. They lifted him upward. It seemed as if they changed directions, but he could not be sure of that. The motion stopped. He felt a firm substance under his feet. The tiny hands released him. the opaque light fell away from him. He was standing in the center of a circle in a room cut out of solid stone, a room that had no exit and no entrance except the one under his feet, the solid stone floor through which the microscopic hands had lifted him.

Panic came up in him then and his hand dived for the gun in his coat pocket. It came away empty. The gun had been removed without his knowledge on the transit upward. Examination revealed that every bit of metal had been removed

from his pockets. Only his wrist watch had been left and that apparently because the metal strap around his wrist had resisted removal. Automatically he pushed the button on the side of the watch. On the dial the tiny green light glowed. Neither the light that had lifted him upward nor this room contained lethal radiations The sight of the green light made him feel better. But not much. Sweat appeared on his skin as he waited. Inside his chest, he felt his heart begin to speed up its beating.

Light danced in the wall. The stone seemed to dissolve The Messenger came through. The wrinkles on the fine face glowed like ivory at the sight of Ronson.

"I hope you will forgive me for keeping you waiting. Other - - ah - - tasks demanded my attention at the moment."

"It's quite all right. Finding myself here unexpectedly was a little hard on my nerves but the chance to see Les Ro will be worth the shock to my nervous system. I assume this is the way." Ronson moved toward the light dancing on the wall, then stopped as he saw the Martian was not following. "What's wrong?"

The smile was gone from the face of the Messenger. "One must prove himself worthy of seeing Les Ro."

"Eh?" A little touch of fear came up in the human. "Worthy?"

"Also, it would be well to tell me why you want to see Les Ro. I will carry your request to him."

"But you said Les Ro wanted to see me, that he had waited a long time for someone like me. Though how he knows anything about me - -" Ronson's voice went into uneasy silence. Had the grapevine reported his coming here? Or had Crick's whisper about extra-sensory perception in operation had some basis in fact?

"I said Les Ro waited a long time for someone like you." For a moment hope showed on the wrinkled face. "But not necessarily for you. You have certain qualities that Les Ro seeks, but until you have proved that you have other qualities as well - -" Sadness replaced the hope "Tell me what you seek here?"

Ronson felt rebellion come up in him. Then he remembered that on Mars the only law protecting humans was what they could make and enforce for themselves. "Rumors have reached us on Earth of Les Ro's great accomplishments. It is our hope that we can share our knowledge, pool our discoveries. It is our belief that great advances can come from this sharing - for both humans and Martians."

Ronson spoke quietly. Only the tone of his voice expressed the very deep and very real feeling he was putting into words. Yet in the quietly spoken words his dream was expressed - - and the dream of every real scientist in the history of Earth - - of progress, of forward motion, of leaving behind them a world a little better than the one they had known. Once this dream had been only for humans. Now it included Martians too, and every other race within the solar system.

The Messenger smiled at the words. But under the smile was concern. "Do you mean that you humans still face problems that you cannot solve? But you have made tremendous scientific advances, much greater than we of Mars have made. Space flight is only one illustration - -"

"Unfortunately, many of our scientific advances have brought more problems than they have solved." Grimness crept into Ron

son's voice "Before atomic energy was released, it was prophesied that the release of this energy would solve all the problems of our planet. This was over two hundred years ago. We are still striving to regain the losses suffered in the first and second atomic wars."

"Wars?" The face of the Martian showed amazement. "You humans are fools."

"We are trying to stop being fools. Or some of us are. But something seems to defeat our efforts."

"Yes." Keen interest showed on the face of the Martian. "Do you have this problem too? I wonder if it's the same something - -"

"We live in the same universe."

"Can you state the problem more exactly?"

"I can give you an illustration of it. At the same time. I will give you my reason for being here." Ronson took a deep breath, considered the words he was going to use. "I'm a bio-physicist. This means that my specialty is the living cell and the changes that can and do take place in it. We have a name for one of the changes that may take place there - - cancer."

"A disease"

"Yes. And a very serious one. Often tied up with radioactivity, it is a change that takes place in the interior of a living cell."

"I know - -"

"No less than eight times in the past hundred years, human doctors have found a cure for this mutation within the cell. Each cure worked, perfectly, for a time."

"And then - -"

"Then this something defeated their efforts. A change took place. A new form of cancer appeared, which did not yield to the treatment that had been effective previously." Ronson found his breathing was becoming heavier.

The Messenger moved up and down the cell, pacing, his right hand rubbing his chin. "Yes, it is the same something. Les Ro has talked of it often. It has defeated even him. He calls it **change**. There seems to be a law in this universe against anything remaining the same - - But why did you come here? Do you seek a new way to cure this disease called cancer?"

"Yes. A permanent way. A way that goes behind the law of change."

"Do you think you could find such a thing here?"

"Yes. And here I have proof. Detailed reports from human physicians at Mars Port. In three instances, Martian patients admitted to the human hospital there were found to be suffering from inoperable cancer. Each was discharged, as incurable. Within the following two years, each patient returned to the hospital there, one to have a knife wound treated, a second to have a broken bone set, a third because of injuries suffered in an accident. As soon as they were admitted, the records were checked, and the previous diagnosis of cancer was found. Each case of cancer had been cured. Each Martian told the same story, that he had been here, and that Les Ro had cured the disease."

"And you came here seeking the ninth solution from Les Ro for your people?"

"Yes. And for one other reason."

"Eh?"

"The cancer I am trying hardest to cure is - - here." Very gently, Jim Ronson rubbed his chest. At the action, and at his thought, his heart picked up an anxious beat.

For an instant, the face of the Martian showed blank astonishment Compassion followed the astonishment, a flood of it. "My son!"

The voice had pity and understanding and sympathy in it. "Les Ro will see you."

"Good!" Relief surged up inside Jim Ronson. He had travelled many a weary mile for this moment. He had faced frustration and despair. The best doctors on Earth had told him they could do nothing for him. Now, here, in the heart of a mountain near the south pole of Mars - -

"Follow me," the Messenger said.

The wall swirled in front of him. He stepped into the misty opaqueness and Ronson followed him. Inside the light, the human felt the millions of microscopic hands take hold of him. Their touch was gentle and caressing, softly tender. Suddenly their touch was firm and strong. He felt them seize his clothing and rip it from his body. Their gentle, caressing touch was gone. In its place was an almost manic fury. A scream ripped involuntarily from his throat.

The scream was flung into complete silence. No echo of it came back to his ears.

Blackness beat at him, flowed in over him, flowed through him. The blackness ransacked every nook and corner of his body. It probed to the bottom of his soul.

It swallowed him whole. It dissected his consciousness, tore it to shreds, then yanked away even the shreds. He seemed to be falling into a black hole that had no end.

Ronson did not know how long the blackness lasted. The first sense to come back was hearing. Somewhere near him he heard a grunt. Then the sense of feeling came back and he realized he was lying naked on sand. He didn't much want to open his eyes. Finally he forced them open. His vision was blurred and vague When it cleared he saw the source of the grunt.

The sound had come from Tal Bock. squatting on the sand near him. Tal Bock was also naked. Unlike Ronson, the millions of microscopic hands in the darkness had not left even a wrist watch on the Martian.

"Happy - - ah - - wind time," Ronson said. Tal Bock grunted, but did not answer.

"Where are we?"

"Hell," Tal Bock said. He got up and walked into the shrubbery behind him.

Ronson rose. He was shaky, his legs seemed too long to reach the sand, a subjective impression that almost amused him, but didn't quite. To the left another Martian was squatting cross-legged on the sand. Ronson looked, then looked again. He moved toward the Martian to make certain.

It was the leper who had been on the street outside the dive. Without the rags, the Martian was hardly recognizable. The sores provided a certain means of identification. There was no mistaking them.

"How did you get here?" Ronson asked.

The leper made a weak gesture with his hands which said, "Go away." His attitude was resigned but about his manner was an air of expectancy.

Ronson discovered that the place in which he had found himself was a cavern about half a mile in diameter. It was adequately lighted though the light sprang from no source that he could detect. The place was pleasant enough. There was water here. It flowed in little rills set in stonework. Grass and desert shrubs grew here. The air was moist, with a fragrant sweetness somewhere about it.

Something was in the air besides the moisture and the fragrant

sweetness. It was intangible, almost imperceptible. Ronson cocked his head, trying to catch this something. It was always out of the range of his sensory perception, an intangible, elusive quality that perplexed him

"Subliminal." he thought. "Maybe super-sonic sound just above the range of hearing."

Why super-sonic sound? He did not know. He felt dazed. There was a heavy feeling through his whole body. Why was he here? He had been told he would see Les Ro There was also talk about a man proving if he was worthy - -

He did not like this thinking. He tried to shut it off, but it was a persistent gadfly that returned to buzz again and again in his brain.

The out-of-hearing sound seemed to buzz with it, slipping in and out of hearing too fast for the mind to grasp it. Each time it slipped into hearing for the fractional part of a second, it brought a flick of agony with it. At the touch, he became almost giddy. Alarm bells rang suddenly inside his head. The note went out of hearing again, the giddiness passed, the alarm bells went into silence

In the shrubbery ahead of him, a figure moved - - Kus Dorken.

Two of the worst killers on Mars were here in this place. A leper. A human. Unease came up inside Jim Ronson, a sharp stab of it. Inside his chest a surge of pain broke through the barriers he had erected around it, reminding him of what was there.

He had come here seeking relief for that surge of pain. Instead of getting what he had asked for, he had been thrust into place. With two killers and a leper and - - A shout broke into his thinking. A Martian was running along the walls, seeking for an exit. It was Te Hold. Te Hold had recovered from the effect of the thormoline and had been brought here. Ronson watched the Martian run along the walls, searching desperately for a way out. Te Hold screamed as he ran but he didn't find an exit. The screams died out as he reached the far end of the oval, then grew stronger as he came back again upon his own steps.

Kus Dorken slid out of sight. Tal Bock was somewhere in that shrubbery too, where, Ronson didn't know. And didn't care. A feeling of hopelessness was coming up in him. He moved back to the leper. squatted on the sand beside the man, asked a question.

The leper's eyes flicked at him in response but there was no other answer. An ecstacy was in the eyes now. The leper was so lost in this ecstacy that such things as grunted noises from a member of an alien race made no impression on him. Ronson envied him. The leper was close to death but he was so lost in some inner ecstacy that death was unimportant to him.

"Did Les Ro's Messenger promise you that you would be cured of your leprosy?" Ronson asked, persisting.

The leper nodded. Again his hand waved in the "Go away," gesture.

"Go away and let you die in peace?" Ronson said

"Just go away," the leper answered.

Ronson rose to his feet, angry. What farce was being perpetrated here? What - - The super-sonic note came into hearing. Pain stabbed at his chest.

He lifted his hand involuntarily. The sight of the dial on his wrist watch forced itself through the pulses of pain.

As a part of his research into cell structure, Ronson had worked

extensively with radioactivity. In order to protect himself, he had had a microscopically small radiation detector built into the watch itself. Three tiny glow tubes were set into the dial. If the green tube glowed, radiation was present but was safe. If the amber light glowed, be wary. If the red light glowed, **get out fast!**

The red light was glowing now. As Ronson stared, it winked out. Before he could take his eyes away from the dial, the red light flicked on again. The super-sonic note came with it. A flick of very real pain came with the note. The red light flicked out, the note vanished. The pain was gone.

"Regular pulsations of radiation are being poured through this place!" Ronson whispered.

It was being done deliberately The whole cavern was being flooded periodically with bursts of radiation. This meant deliberate intention, purpose, plan. He did not know what impact this radiation might have on Martian flesh but he could guess the effect it might have on human tissue.

Fear came up in him, a flood of it. Anger followed it. The lights on his watch danced. Pain, agony, and the shrill note of the super-sonic came again, Grimly, he began to prowl the cavern, searching for the source of the radiations. The radiation counter in his watch led him to it, by the increased intensity of its glow. The radiations were coming from a single spot in the wall of the cavern. So far as he could tell, the wall was solid stone at this place, but he had seen solid stone walls dissolve in this madhouse Behind this spot there was intelligent direction of the bursts of radiation

Back there Les Ro, or someone with him, was playing games of life and death with --

Te Hold came past him, screaming. The Martian was beginning to stumble as he ran. The screams were only gasping sounds in his throat. Voices rose in shouted argument somewhere in the shrubbery. Ronson moved away.

"What's going on there?" he asked the leper.

"Tal Bock - - and Kus Dorken - - have disagreed - - as to which is the bigger killer - - and therefore which is the more worthy. They fight - - to decide the problem."

The words were quietly spoken. The tone said the matter was of no importance. After he had finished speaking, the leper's eyes went back to the inner ecstacy that he seemed to be watching. Or was it **future** ecstacy that he was imagining?

"I hope there is a heaven for Martians," Ronson said. So far as he knew, only in heaven could this leper's health be restored. Was the same true for him?

Voices screamed in the shrubbery. Giving ground before the heavy blows Tal Bock was striking at him, Kus Dorken came stumbling backward. He slipped in the sand and fell heavily. Tal Bock leaped at him. Kus Dorken screamed once, a sound that gasped into silence as Tal Bock's fingers closed over his throat. For a time, they threshed in the sand. Then Kus Dorken went limp. Viciously Tal Bock slapped his foe across the face. When there was no response, he poured sand into Kus Dorken's mouth, scooping it up in handfuls and cramming it down his foe's gullet.

Tal Bock got to his feet. The scream that ripped from his lips was pure triumph. Utterly naked, he stood beside the body of his victim, shaking his fist at the roof of the

cavern, screaming defiance at the universe.

Ronson fervidly hoped that the radiation flowing through the Martian would strike him dead. The scream went into silence. Tal Bock's gaze fell on the leper, he moved in that direction. Viciously he kicked the leper.

The sick Martian slipped from his squatting position and lay inert.

Ronson moved forward. With all the strength that he possessed, he hit Tal Bock behind the ear. As he struck the blow, the super-sonic note screamed through him.

Ronson's blow knocked Tal Bock sprawling. Like a gigantic cat, the Martian came to his feet.

Ping!

Tal Bock moved toward Ronson in little short steps. He was like a cat getting ready to pounce. The grin on his face said he was going to anticipate destroying this human.

Ping!

Tal Bock lost his footing. He fell heavily and tried to rise. A confused expression was on his face. The effort to rise was more than he could manage. Collapsing, he lay without moving

"Jim! Here! Quick!" The voice came from the shrubbery. His first thought was that he was hallucinating. Jennie Ware and Sam Crick could not be there in that shrubbery, fully clothed, Jennie beckoning frantically to him, Crick with a needle gun in his hand.

They came to him, on the run. Jennie caught one arm, Crick caught the other. Supporting him between them, they ran through the shrubbery. In the opposite wall, a hole showed. an honest opening, not a light-swirling mirage. Inside it, Crick swung shut a door. A Martian lay on the floor of the tunnel.

"How -- how did you get here?" Ronson gasped.

Crick nodded to the Martian on the floor. "We persuaded Tocko to bring us. He knew a little more about this place than he ever let on. After he brought us here, we gave him a needle, to keep him quiet while we rescued you." The tall adventurer grinned as he spoke

"Come on, Jim We know the way out of here. If we get out before they discover what has happened --" The girl was all frantic motion moving toward escape.

"I'm not going," Ronson said.

"What?" the girl gasped.

Ronson turned to Crick. "Do you have an extra gun?"

"Of course. But, Jim --"

"Lend it to me, will you? I may need it before I'm finished here."

"Eh?" Crick was startled.

Ronson explained what he meant. Crick's face grew grim. He took an extra needle gun out of his coat pocket. "I guess maybe you could use a little help on this job, Jim. Eh, Jennie?" He glanced at the girl.

Fear was on her face. She wanted to run, to get away, forever, from this place of horror. But some things were more important than running.

"We'll make it a threesome," she said.

"Good girl!" Ronson spoke.

A passage circled the oval cavern. With Ronson in the lead, they followed it until they came to the spot from which the radiations were being poured into the cavern Here was a large room. The passage led directly into it.

Inside the room was a tremendous array of complex electrical apparatus. Ronson had never seen anything as good as this in even the best laboratories back on Earth. He could not even guess the purpose of most of the equipment. it had been de-

signed by a Martian mind and constructed by Martian hands -- with a Martian goal in view.

Set in the middle of the room were the control panels of the equipment. Directly above the panels was a smoky visio screen that revealed dimly what was happening in the cavern. Just rising from his place at the controls was -- the Messenger.

He looked up and into the muzzle of the needle gun Ronson was holding. A tiny startled reaction played across his poised face, disturbing the many wrinkles there, then was gone. A smile replaced it.

"Ah, yes. I had just discovered you were missing and I was starting to look for you."

Behind him, Ronson heard Jennie Ware catch her breath. He knew she was thinking that they should have run while they had the chance.

"We saved you the trouble, Les Ro," Ronson said.

The startled reaction was more pronounced this time. "You guessed?"

"That Les Ro and his Messenger were one and the same? It was obvious when you did not need to communicate what I had said to Les Ro. How many others are here with you?"

The question was important. Their own survival depended on the number of Martians here.

The startled reaction was very real this time. "No one else is here?"

"You are alone!"

"I am alone. Many times I have longed - - - "

"Watch him Jim." Crick whispered. "This doesn't smell right to me."

"Do you mean to tell me that you alone built this apparatus?" Ronson gestured toward the array of equipment in the room.

"This? This is only a part. It was a long task. Many weary years I have spent here - - - "

"He's telling the truth, Jim," Jennie Ware whispered.

"But one pair of hands, to build all of this." Shock was in Ronson, perhaps even greater shock than he had experienced in the cavern. He stared at Les Ro. Respect was in him and admiration, if not liking. "Then you are indeed a genius. The rumors were partly right, after all."

"Thank you."

"But why couldn't you get someone to help you?"

Sadness showed on Les Ro's face. "You have seen the people in the drinking room below. Which of them could understand how an electron circles in its orbit? Many times I have tried to train the brightest of them. The result was inevitable failure. That is why, when you came - - -" Longing came into Les Ro's eyes.

"Watch him, Jim," Crick whispered.

"I know it doesn't track," Ronson said. His voice grew grim and hard. Bitterness boiled in it. He was facing his own frustration here, in the failure of his deep hopes in coming to this place. A touch of pain moving through his chest told him what that failure meant to him. He gestured toward the cavern. "Out there I saw Martians destroying each other. In this, they were wiser than they knew. The ones who died quickly were lucky. The choice was between a quick death and slow, horrible death from the radiation pouring through that place."

Pain and consternation showed on Les Ro's face. He seemed to hear only Ronson's last words. "How did you detect the radiation?"

"With this." Ronson nodded toward his watch.

"This is wonderful. You humans actually have a reliable method of detecting radiation! I have striven so hard to build such a device. Let me see it." He moved toward Ronson as if nothing else were of any importance in comparison to the detector.

"Stand back. Kus Dorken and Te Hold and the leper would not have thought the radiation pouring through them was wonderful, if they had known about it. Nor will Tal Bock, before he dies."

Real pain darkened the fine patina of the Martian's face. "Do you really believe this of me?"

"I saw it happen," Ronson answered. "I was there. I saw Tal Bock destroy Kus Dorken - - - "

"One moment, please." Les Ro's hand moved among the controls. Ronson's hand tightened on the trigger. He held off firing. Somewhere a relay thudded home. Power surged. The wall in the front of the room began to glow with light.

"Wait, please! Wait!"

The leper came first through the swirling mistiness. He walked erect, his back straight and his head up. The light of eager anticipation was still in his eyes but something new had been added now - - - realization.

"But Tal Bock killed him. I saw it," Ronson whispered.

"No," Les Ro gently negated. "When Tal Bock attacked him, I put him into a trance condition, to save him."

Ronson hardly heard the answer. His eyes were fixed on something else. "The sores - - - " The sores were not gone but they had diminished in size. Replacing the rotten tissue, new flesh had already begun to form

"This is what he asked, when he came to me," Les Ro said. "This is what he got."

"But this is a miracle."

Again Les Ro denied the statement. "This is natural law in operation, though to you the laws may be unknown. Watch."

The leper would have dropped to his knees and kissed Les Ro's hand, but the Martian forbade it, sending him to wait elsewhere.

Te Hold came through the swirling light - - - a Te Hold who was without fear. Then, Kus Dorken came. He was still spitting sand out of his mouth but the bluster and the bravado and the anger were gone from him. He was a new Kus Dorken. Inside, he had been subtly changed. Flowing outward, the change showed on his face as a gentle kindliness.

"He was a killer when I saw him first," Jennie Ware said. "Now - - - he looks like a saint."

Les Ro smiled at her. "He will be a saint, from now on. He knows how to be one, now. As to Tal Bock, he has not yet recovered from your needles. When he does recover, he will come out of the cavern a saint too."

"But why didn't you tell me about this?" Ronson whispered. "Why did you just thrust me, and presumably the others too, in there without warning. Why didn't you tell us?"

"To have told you, might have defeated my purpose, or prolonged its achievement. I put all who come to me in the cavern. There, the killer will try to kill, the coward will run, the brave man will fight. As the killer tries to kill, he will use the reaction patterns he has known all his life As he uses them, I throw bursts of energy at him. I disconnect the kill patterns. The energy penetrates right down to the levels of the cells, and even goes lower than that, changing old patterns - - - "

"New lamps for old," the girl whispered.

Ronson was silent. His thinking was perturbed, almost bewildered. What Les Ro had said made sense. Reaction patterns had to change down to and through the cellular level. If the patterns were struck by burst of radiant enegry - - - but this was the method nature used! This was the method of the *something* they had sought but which had always eluded them. The change in the cells that was called cancer - - - again pain flicked through his chest - - - more often than not this change was brought about by radiant energy operating on cellular structure! Les Ro had organized this something, this wild talent of nature, and was making it do useful work.

"But it did not work for me," Ronson protested.

"Human cellular structure and Martian cellular structure are different," Les Ro answered. "This is the first opportunity I have had to work with humans. More time is needed to produce the changes in them. That is all." A beatific smile lit the face of the old Martian. It went slowly away as his eyes came to focus on the girl. Ronson turned, gasped when he saw what she was doing.

She was stripping herself. Without embarrassment and shame, she took off her clothes. She stood before them, naked.

"A human woman!" Les Ro said.

"Outside, I'm a woman," Jennie Ware answered. "But inside I've got more of the organization of a man than a woman. The result has been that all my life there's been a fight within me. Instead of being a woman, I have only succeeded in being a bitch, all jangle of nerves, always trying to do what the men did, but knowing I really couldn't, because I was a woman. I'm tired of this. I'm sick and tired of it!" Her voice grew frantic for a moment. Then she was calm again.

"I want to be a woman. Do you think that if I went in there - - - " she gestured toward the cavern, "that you could help me be a - - - woman?" The appeal in her eyes and in her voice begged for one answer.

"I have never worked with a human woman - - - "

"Then use me as a guinea pig!" As if the answer were predetermined, her chin up, with not a look behind her, she moved through the misty light and out of sight - - - like Eve stepping into the Garden of Eden in the dawn of a new world.

Les Ro's hands moved over the switches.

Jim Ronson dropped the needle gun. For a split second, he hesitated. Then he walked toward the swirling light.

Les Ro's voice stopped him. "When you are cured, my son, when you are finished in there, come back, and we will work together on the problems of your world and mine. This I have dreamed of since the first day I began work here, that someone with sufficient intelligence might come to work beside me."

Ronson smiled, nooded. As he stepped into the mistiness, Les Ro's face beamed at him, enhaloed, like a saint.

The girl was wandering through the shrubbery. She seemed not to see him but when he came into step beside her, she looked up and smiled. Arm in arm, they walked together, in a place that had been hell, but was now heaven, waiting for the miracle to take place within them. And little by little, in minute bursts of spurting quanta, Jim Ronson

felt the pain in his chest go away.

The girl beside him was no longer the bitter harriden who had almost turned Pluto Dome upside down when she had been ejected from a space ship that never returned. She was no longer the unhappy roamer who had wandered the paths of the planets, defying all creation and herself. She was becoming something else - - - a woman. The fact showed in the gentleness of her smile.

His arm went around her and she came closer without hesitation. A glow came up inside of both them, and grew stronger

THE END

For sale: hundreds of stf mags dating from 1949, stf books, some Burroughs; dozens of fanzines, several SAPS mailings, all reasonably priced, or will trade for 1940-45 ASF or such stf books or fantasy which I have not read. Carol McKinney, 4239 Oak Knoll Dr., Carmichael, Calif . . . *Thousands of comics back to* 1938 *for sale. Rare issues of Famous Funnies, Classics, E.C.'s and others. May trade for stf mags and items or other comics. I'll buy any older than* 1950. *Send your wants for trade or sale. Want stf stills. Billy Meyers,* 4301 *Shawnee Circle, Chattanooga* 11, *Tenn* . . . Back issues, late 40s, early 50s, also 50 copies English sf. Also out-of-print stf books. I want Worm Ourobourous, Gray Lensman, 2nd Stage Lensman, Children of the Lens. Welcome correspondence; interested in Shaver, Dianetics, psychology, Club organization, Esper and fantasy in general. Seth A. Johnson, 339 Stiles St., Vaux Hall, N. J. . . *Wanted, all early issues of EC.s, Weird Science and Weird Fantasy. Also other "new trend" E. C. comics. Will pay fair price or trade. Douglas Payson, Box* 272, *Steilacoom, Wash* . . . Wanted, books and magazine stories by Max Brand (David Manning, George Challis, etc). Will buy or trade for fantasy and sf books and mags. Michael Fogaris, 492 Lafayette Ave., Passaic, N. J. . . . *Want back issues Planet, Orbit, Amazing, Fantastic, If. Send list, condition, price. Bob Sergeant,* 2902 *St. Paul St., Indianapolis* 3, *Ind.* . . Any Other Worlds before 1952 regardless of condition, also Conan books (Conan the Barbarian, King Conan, etc). Willing to buy, but would rather trade for the following: A Tramp Abroad, by Mark Twain, 635 pages, pub. 1879 poor condition, Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural pub 1944, 1080 pages good condition. Adventures to Come, pub 1938, good condition. Also have Mad, Incredible SF, Weird SF, Airboy, Buster Crabbe, Forbidden Worlds, Riot, Cockeyed, Panic, etc. have many comics printed in Spanish, such as Cuentos de Brujas, Brujas y Vampiros, Cumbres de Tortura, Titanes Planetarious, Superman. D. M. McCarroll, 644 Avenue C, Boulder City, Nev. . . . *Wanted, all Science Stories, Other Worlds, Universe in excellent condition. Alan Lewis, Jewett-Holmwood Rd., East Aurora, N. Y.* . . . Wanted, any Amazing previous to 1949. Also OW, Madge previous to 1952. Brian Caden, 3528 Vermont Ave., Louisville, Ky. . . . *Fellow Presley-Haters. Send a 3 cent stamp for the issue of Anti-Elvis publication, "The Croaker". Also Vol.* 2, *Number* 2, *of Planet Stories* (1939) *for* $1.50. *Leslie Gerber,* 201 *Linden Blvd., Brooklyn* 6, *N.Y.* . . . Wanted: Flash, Green Lantern comics. Few DCs before 1950. State condition, price, and issue. Tom Cagle, 3403 Harrison St., El Paso, Texas . . . *Am selling* 800 *mags from* 1947 *on,* 46 *titles. Mostly stf.* 25c *each. State wants. Leon Novich,* 1897 *McCarter, Apt.* 5E, *Newark* 4, *N. J.* . . . 44 books, all stf or fantasy, bargains. Write for list. Harold A. Dunster, 241 South St. Road, Auburn N.Y . . . . *Wants copy for fanzine. John W. Thiel,* 4901 *Hamlin Ave., Midlothian, Ill.*

THE END

Somewhere on the time Ellipse Mike Kenscroft became Adrik and the only way to return to his own identity was to find the Keep of the Dreamer, and loose the terrible

FALCONS of NARABEDLA

By Marion Zimmer Bradley

I could see a slim, young figure clad in silken silver [illegible] silvery silks.

Photo from "The Mole People," Universal International and Cynthia Patrick

CHAPTER ONE

Voltage — from Nowhere!

Somewhere on the crags above us I heard a big bird scream.

I turned to Andy, knee-deep in the icy stream beside me. "There's your eagle. Probably smells that cougar I shot yesterday." I started to reel in my line, knowing what my brother's next move would be. "Get the camera, and we'll try for a picture."

We crouched together in the underbrush, watching, as the big bird of prey wheeled down in a slow spiral toward the dead cougar. Andy was trembling with excitement, the camera poised against his chest, his eyes glued in the image-finder. "Golly —" he whispered, almost prayerfully, "six foot wing spread — maybe more —"

The bird screamed again, warily, head cocked into the wind. We were to leeward; the scent of the carrion masked our enemy smell from him. The eagle failed to scent or to see us, swooping down and dropping on the cougar's head. Andy's camera clicked twice. The eagle thrust in its beak —

A red-hot wire flared in my brain. The bird — the bird — I leaped out of cover, running swiftly across the ten-foot clearing that separated us from the attacking eagle, my hand tugging automatically at the hunting knife in my belt. Andy's shout of surprised anger was a faraway noise in my ears as the eagle started away with flapping, angry wings — then, in fury, swept down at me, pinions beating around my head. I heard and felt the wicked beak dart in, and thrust blindly upward with the knife, ripped, slashing, hearing the bird's scream of pain and the flapping of wide wings. A red haze spun around me —

Then the screaming eagle was gone and Andy's angry grip was on my shoulder, shaking me roughly. His voice, furious and frightened, was hardly recognizable. "Mike! Mike, you darned idiot, are you all right? You must be crazy!"

I blinked, rubbing my hand across my eyes. The hand came away wet. I was standing in the clearing, the knife in my hand red with blood. Bird blood. I heard myself ask, stupidly "What happened?"

My brother's face came clear out of the thickness in my mind, scowling wrathfully. "You tell me what happened! Mike, what in the devil were you thinking about? You told me yourself that an eagle will attack a man if he's bothered. I had him square in the camera when you jumped out of there like a bat out of a belfry and went for the eagle with your knife! You must be clean crazy!"

I let the knife drop out of my hand. "Yeah —" I said heavily, "Yeah, I guess I spoiled your picture, Andy. I'm sorry — I didn't —" my voice trailed off, helpless. The boy's hand was still on my shoulder; he let it drop and knelt in the grass, groping there for his camera. "That's all right, Mike," he said in a dead voice, "you scared the daylights out of me, that's all." He stood up swiftly, looking straight into my face. "Darn it, Mike, you've been acting crazy for a week! I don't mind the blamed camera, but when you start going for eagles with your bare hands —" abruptly he flung the camera away, turned and began to run down the slope in the direction of the cabin.

I took a step to follow, then stopped, bending to retrieve the broken pieces of Andy's cherished camera. The kid must have hit the eagle with it. Lucky thing for me; an eagle

can be a mean bird. But why, why in the living hell had I done a thing like that? I'd warned Andy time and time again to stay clear of the big birds. Now that the urgency of action had deserted me, I felt stupid and a little lightheaded. I didn't wonder Andy thought I was crazy. I thought so myself more than half the time. I stowed the broken camera in my tackle box, mentally promising Andy a better one; hunted up the abandoned lines and poles, carefully stowed them, cleaned our day's catch. It was dark before I started for the cabin; I could hear the hum of the electric dynamo I'd rigged up and see the electric light across the dusk of the Sierras. A smell of bacon greeted me as I crossed into the glare of the unshielded bulb. Andy was standing at the cookstove, his back stubbornly to me. He did not turn

"Andy —" I said.

"It's okay, Mike. Sit down and eat your supper. I didn't wait for the fish."

"Andy — I'll get you another camera —"

"I said, it's okay. Now, damn it, eat."

He didn't speak again for a long time; but as I stretched back for a second mug of coffee, he got up and began to walk around the room, restlessly. "Mike —" he said entreatingly, "you came here for a rest! Why can't you lay off your everlasting work for a while and relax?" He looked disgustedly over his shoulder at the work table where the light spilled over a confused litter of wires and magnets and coils. "You've turned this place into a branch office of General Electric!"

"I can't stop now!" I said violently. "I'm on the track of something — and if I stop I'll never find it!"

"Must be real important," Andy said sourly, "if it makes you act like bughouse bait."

I shrugged without answering. We'd been over that before. I'd known it when they threw me out of the government lab, just after the big blowup. I thought, angrily, I'm heading for another one, but I don't care.

"Sit down, Andy," I told him. "You don't know what happened down there Now that the war's over, it's no military secret, and I'll tell you what happened."

I paused, swallowing down the coffee, not knowing that it scalded my mouth. "That is — I will if I can."

Six months before they settled the war in Korea, I was working in a government radio lab, on some new communications equipment. Since I never finished it, there's no point in going into details; it's enough to say it would have made radar as obsolete as the stagecoach. I'd built a special supersonic condenser, and had had trouble with a set of magnetic coils that wouldn't wind properly. When the thing blew up I hadn't had any sleep for three nights, but that wasn't the reason I was normal then; just another communications man, intent on radio and this new equipment and without any of the crazy impractical notions that had lost me my job later. They called it overwork, but I knew they thought the explosion had disturbed my brain. I didn't blame them I would have liked to think so.

It started one day in the lab with a shadow on the sun and an elusive short circuit that gave me shock after shock until I was jittery. By the time I had it fixed, the oscillator had gone out of control. I got a series of low-frequency waves that

were like nothing I'd ever seen before. Then there was something like a voice speaking out of a very old, jerry-built amateur radio set. Except that there wasn't a receiver in the lab, and no one else had heard it. I wasn't sure myself, because right then every instrument in the place went haywire and five minutes later, part of the ceiling hit the floor and the floor went up through the roof. They found me, they say, lying half-crushed under a beam, and I woke up eighteen hours later in a hospital with four cracked ribs, and a feeling as if I'd had a lot of voltage poured into me. It went in the report that I'd been struck by lightning.

It took me a long time to get well. The ribs healed fast — faster than the doctor liked. I didn't mind the hospital part, except that I couldn't walk without shaking, or light a cigarette without burning myself, for months. The thing I minded was what I remembered before I woke up. Delirium; that was what they told me. But the kind and type of scars on my body didn't ring true. Electricity — even freak lightning — doesn't make that kind of burns. And my corner of the world doesn't make a habit of branding people.

But before I could show the scars to anybody outside the hospital, they were gone. Not healed; just gone. I remembered the look on the medic's face when I showed him the place where the scars had been. He didn't think I was crazy; he thought he was.

I knew the lab hadn't been struck by lightning. The Major knew it too; I found that out the day I reported back to work. All the time we talked, his big pen moved in stubby circles across the page of his logbook, and he talked without raising his head to look at me.

"I know all that, Kenscott. No electrical storms reported in the vicinity; no radio disturbance within a thousand miles But —" his jaw grew stubborn, "the lab was wrecked and you were hurt. We've got to have something for the record."

I could understand all that. What I resented was the way they treated me after I went back to work. They transferred me to another division and another line of work. They turned down my request to follow up those nontypical waves. My private notes were ripped out of my notebook while I was at lunch and I never saw them again. And as soon as they could, they shipped me to Fairbanks, Alaska, and that was the end of that.

The Major told me all I needed to know, the day before I took the plane to Alaska. His scowl said more than his words, and they said plenty. "I'd let it alone, Kenscott. No sense stirring up more trouble. We can't bother with side alleys, anyhow. Next time you monkey with it, you might get your head blown off, not just a dose of stray voltage out of the blue. We've done everything but stand on our heads trying to find out where that spare energy came from and where it went. But we've marked that whole line of research closed, Kenscott. If I were you, I'd keep my mouth shut about it."

"It wasn't a message from Mars," I suggested unsmiling, and he didn't think that was funny either. But there was relief on his face as I left the office and went to clean out my drawer.

I got along all right in Alaska, for a while. But I wasn't the same. The armistice had hardly been signed when they sent me back to the States with a recommendation of

overwork. I tried to explain it to Andy. "They said I needed a rest. Maybe so. The shock did something funny to me .... tore me open .... like the electric shock treatments they give catatonic patients. I know a lot of things I never learned. Ordinary radio work doesn't mean anything to me any more. It doesn't make sense. When people out west were talking about flying saucers or whatever they were — and when they talked about weather disturbances after the atomic tests, things did make sense for a while. And when we came down here —" I paused, trying to fit confused impressions together. He wasn't going to believe me, anyhow, but I wanted him to. A tree slapped against the cabin window; I jumped. "It started up again the day we came up in the mountains Energy out of nowhere, following me around. It can't knock me out. Have you noticed I let you turn the lights on and off? The day we came up, I shorted my electric razor and blew out five fuses trying to change one."

"Yeah, I remember, you had to drive to town for them —" My brother's eyes watched me, uneasy. "Mike, you're kidding —"

"I wish I were," I said "That energy just drains into me, and nothing happens. I'm immune." I shrugged, rose and walked across to the radio I'd put in here, so carefully, before the war. I picked up the disconnected plug, thrust it into the socket. I snapped the dial on. "I'll show you," I told him

The panel flashed and darkened; confused static came cracking from the speaker, erratic. I took my hand away.

"Turn it up—" Andy said uneasily.

My hand twiddled the dial. "It's already up."

"Try another station;" the kid insisted stubbornly. I pushed all the buttons in succession; the static crackled and buzzed, the panel light flickered on and off in little cryptic flashes. I sighed. "And reception was perfect at noon," I told him, "You were listening to the news." I took my hand away again. "I don't want to blow the thing up"

Andy came over and switched the button back on The little panel light glowed steadily, and the mellow voice of Milton Cross filled the room ... "now conduct the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra in the Fifth or 'Fate' symphony of Ludwig von Beethoven ..." the noise of mixed applause, and then the majestic chords of the symphony, thundering through the rooms of the cabin.

"Ta-da-da-dumm --- Ta-da-da-DUMM!"

My brother stared at me as racing woodwinds caught up with the brasses. There was nothing wrong with the radio. "Mike What did you do to it?"

"I wish I knew," I told him. Reaching, I touched the volume button again.

Beethoven died in a muttering static like a thousand drums.

I swore and Andy sucked in his breath between his teeth, edging warily backward. He touched the dials again; once more the smoothness of the "Fate" symphony rolled out and swallowed us. I shivered.

"You'd better let it alone!" Andy said shakily

The kid turned in early, but I stayed in the main room, smoking restlessly and wishing I could get a drink without driving eighty miles over bad mountain roads. Neither of us had thought to turn off the radio; it was moaning out some interminable throbbing jazz. I turn-

ed over my notes, restlessly, not really seeing them. Once Andy's voice came sleepily from the alcove.

"Going to read all night, Mike?"

"If I feel like it," I said tersely and began walking up and down again.

"Michael! For the luvvagod stop it and let me get some sleep!" Andy exploded, and I sank down in the chair again. "Sorry, Andy."

Where had the intangible part of me been, those eighteen hours when I first lay crushed under a fallen beam, then under morphine in the hospital? Where had those scars come from? More important, what had made a radio lab blow up in the first place? Electricity sets fires; it shocks men into insensibility or death. It doesn't explode. Radio waves are in themselves harmless. Most important of all, what maniac freak of lightning was I carrying in my body that made me immune to electrical current? I hadn't told Andy about the time I'd deliberately grounded the electric dynamo in the cellar and taken the whole voltage in my body I was still alive. It would have been a hell of a way to commit suicide — but I hadn't.

I swore, slamming down the window. I was going to bed. Andy was right. Either I was crazy or there was something wrong; in any case, sitting here wouldn't help. If it didn't let up, I'd take the first train home and see a good electrician — or a psychiatrist. But right now, I was going to hit the sack.

My hand went out automatically and switched the light off.

"Damn!" I thought incredulously. I'd shorted the dynamo again. The radio stopped as if the whole orchestra had dropped dead; every light in the cabin winked swiftly out, but my hand on the switch crackled with a phosphorescent glow as the entire house current poured into my body. I tingled with weird shock; I heard my own teeth chattering.

And something snapped wide open in my brain. I heard, suddenly, an excited voice, shouting.

"Rhys! Rhys! That is the man!"

CHAPTER TWO

Rainbow City

"You are mad," said the man with the tired voice.

I was drifting I was swaying, bodiless, over a huge abyss of caverned space; chasmed, immense, limitless. Vaguely, through a sleeping distance, I heard two voices. This one was old and very tired

"You are mad. They will know. Narayan will know."

"Narayan is a fool." said the second voice.

"Narayan is the Dreamer," the tired voice said. "He is the Dreamer, and where the Dreamer walks he will know. But have it your way. I am very old and it does not matter. I give you this power, freely — to spare you. But Gamine —"

"Gamine —" the second voice stopped. After a long time "You are old, and a fool, Rhys," it said. "What is Gamine to me?"

Bodiless, blind, I drifted and swayed and swung in the sound of the voices. The humming, like a million high-tension wires, sang around me and I felt myself cradled in the pull of a great magnet that held me suspended surely on nothingness and drew me down into the field of some force beneath Far below me the voices faded. I swung free — fell — plunged downward in sickening motion, head over heels, into the abyss .....

My feet struck hard flooring. I wrenched back to consciousness with

a jolt. Winds blew coldly in my face; the cabin walls had been flung back to the high-lying stars. I was standing at a barred window at the very pinnacle of a tall tower, in the lap of a weird blueness that arched flickeringly in the night. I caught a glimpse of a startled face, a lean tired old face beneath a peaked hood, in the moment before my knees gave way and I fell, striking my head against the bars of the window.

I was lying on a narrow, high bed in a room filled with doors and bars. I could see the edge of a carved mirror set in a frame, and the top of a chest of some kind. On a bench at the edge of my field of vision there were two figures sitting. One was the old grey man, hunched wearily beneath his robe, wearing robes like a Tibetan Lama's, somber black, and a peaked hood of grey. The other was a slimmer younger figure, swathed in silken silvery veiling, with a thin opacity where the face should have been, and a sort of opalescent shine of flesh through the silvery-sapphire silks. The figure was that of a boy or a slim immature girl; it sat erect, motionless, and for a long time I studied it, curious, between half-opened lids. But when I blinked, it rose and passed though one of the multitudinous doors; at once a soft sibilance of draperies announced return. I sat up, getting my feet to the floor, or almost there; the bed was higher than a hospital bed. The blue-robe held a handled mug, like a baby's drinking-cup, at me. I took it in my hand hesitated —

"Neither drug nor poison," said the blue-robe mockingly, and the voice was as noncomittal as the veiled body; a sexless voice, soft alto, a woman's or a boy's. "Drink and be glad it is none of Karamy's brewing."

I tasted the liquid in the mug; it had an indeterminate greenish look and a faint pungent taste I could not identify, although it reminded me variously of anis and garlic. It seemed to remove the last traces of shock I handed the cup back empty and looked sharply at the old man in the Lama costume.

"You're — Rhys?" I said. "Where in hell have I gotten to?" At least, that's what I meant to say. Imagine my surprise when I found myself asking — in a language I'd never heard, but understood perfectly — "To which of the domains of Zandru have I been consigned now?" At the same moment I became conscious of what I was wearing. It seemed to be an old-fashioned nightshirt, chopped off at the loins, deep crimson in color. "Red flannels yet!" I thought with a gulp of dismay. I checked my impluse to get out of bed. Who could act sane in a red nightshirt?

"You might have the decency to explain where I am," I said. "If you know."

The tiredness seemed part of Rhys voice. "Adric," he said wearily. "Try to remember." He shrugged his lean shoulders. "You are in your own Tower. And you have been under restraint again. I am sorry." His voice sounded futile. I felt prickling shivers run down my backbone. In spite of the weird surroundings, the phrase "under restraint" had struck home. I was a lunatic in an asylum.

The blue-robed one cut in in that smooth, sexless, faint-sarcastic voice. "While Karamy holds the amnesia-ray, Rhys, you will be explaining it to him a dozen times a cycle. He will never be of use to us again. This time Karamy won. Adric; try to remember. You are at home, in

Narabedla."

I shook my head. Nightshirt or no nightshirt, I'd face this on my feet. I walked to Rhys; put my clenched hands on his shoulders. "Explain this! Who am I supposed to be? You called me Adric. I'm no more Adric than you are!'

"Adric, you are not amusing!" The blue-robe's voice was edged with anger. "Use what intelligence you have left! You have had enough sharig antidote to cure a tharl. Now Who are you?"

The words were meaningless. I stared, trapped. I clung to hold on to identity. "Adric —" I said, bewildered. That was my name. Was it? Wasn't it? No. I was Mike Kenscott. Hang on to that. Two and two are four. The circumference equals the radius squared times pi. Four rulls is the chemming of twilp — **stop that!** Mike Kenscott. Summer 1954. Army serial number 13-48746. Karamy. I cradled my bursting head in my hands. "I'm crazy. Or you are. Or we're both sane and this monkey-business is all real."

"It is real," said Rhys, compassion in his tired face. "He has been very far on the Time Ellipse, Gamine. Adric, try to understand. This was Karamy's work. She sent you out on a time line, far, very far into the past. Into a time when the Earth was different — she hoped you would come back changed, or mad." His eyes brooded. "I think she succeeded. Gamine, I have long outstayed my leave. I must return to my own tower — or die. Will you explain?"

"I will." A hint of emotion flickered in the voice of Gamine. "Go, Master."

Rhys left the room, through one of the doors. Gamine turned impatiently to me again. "We waste time this way. Fool, look at yourself!"

I strode to a mirror that lined one of the doors. Above the crimson nightshirt I saw a face — not my own. The sight rocked my mind. Out of the mirror a man's face looked anxiously; a face eagle-thin, darkly moustached, with sharp green eyes. The body belonging to the face that was **not** mine was lean and long and strongly muscled — and not quite human. I squeezed my eyes shut. This couldn't be — I opened my eyes. The man in the red nightshirt I was wearing was still reflected there.

I turned my back on the mirror, walking to one of the barred windows to look down on the familiar outline of the Sierra Madre, about a hundred miles away. I couldn't have been mistaken. I knew that ridge of mountains. But between me and the mountains lay a thickly forested expanse of land which looked like no scenery I had ever seen in my life. I was standing near the pinnacle of a high tower; I dimly saw the curve of another, just out of my line of vision. The whole landscape was bathed in a curiously pinkish light; through an overcast sky I could just make out, dimly, the shadowy disk of a watery red sun. Then — no, I wasn't dreaming, I really did see it — beyond it, a second sun; blue-white, shining brilliantly, pallid through the clouds, but brighter than any sunlight I had ever seen.

It was proof enough for me. I turned desperately to Gamine behind me. "Where have I gotten to? Where — **when** am I? Two suns — those mountains —"

The change in Gamine's voice was swift; the veiled face lifted questioningly to mine. What I had thought a veil was not that; it seemed to be more like a shimmering screen wrapped around the fea-

tures so that Gamine was faceless, an invisible person with substance but no apprehensible characteristics. Yes, it was like that; as if there was an invisible person wearing the curious silken draperies. But the invisible flesh was solid enough. Hands like cold steel gripped my shoulders. "You have been back? Back to the days before the second sun? Adric, tell me; did Earth truly have but one sun?"

"Wait —" I begged. "You mean I've travelled in time?"

The exultation faded from Gamine's voice imperceptibly. "Never mind. It is improbable in any case. No, Adric; not really travelling. You were only sent out on the Time Ellipse, till you contacted some one in that other Time. Perhaps you stayed in contact with his mind so long that you think you are he?"

"I'm not Adric —" I raged. "Adric sent me here —"

I saw the blurring around Gamine's invisible features twitch in a headshake. "It's never been proven that two minds can be interchanged like that. Adric's body. Adric's brain. The brain convolutions, the memory centers, the habit patterns — you'd still be Adric. The idea that you are someone else is only an illusion of your conscious mind. It will wear off."

I shook my head, puzzled. "I still don't believe it. Where am I?"

Gamine moved impatiently. "Oh, very well. You are Adric of Narabedla; and if you are sane again, Lord of the Crimson Tower. I am Gamine." The swathed shoulders moved a little. "You don't remember? I am a spell-singer."

I jerked my elbow toward the window. "Those are my own mountains out there," I said roughly. "I'm not Adric, whoever he is. My name's Mike Kenscott, and your hanky-panky doesn't impress me. Take off that veil and let me see your face."

"I wish you meant that —" a mournfulness breathed in the soft contralto. A sudden fury blazed up in me from nowhere. "And what right have you to pry for that old fool Rhys? Get back to your own place, then, spell-singer " I broke off, appalled. What was I saying? Worse, what did I mean by it? Gamine turned. The sexless voice was coldly amused. "Adric spoke then. Whoever sits in the seat of your soul, you are the same — and past redemption!" The robes whispered sibilantly on the floor as Gamine moved to the door. "Karamy is welcome to her slave!"

The door slammed.

Left alone, I flung myself down on the high bed, stubbornly concentrating on Mike Kenscott, shutting out the vague blurred mystery in my mind that was Adric impinging on consciousness. I was not Adric. I would **not** be. I dared not go to the window and look out at the terrifying two suns, even to see the reassurance of the familiar Sierra Madre skyline. A homesick terror was hurting in me.

But persistently the Adric memories came, a guilty feeling of a shirked duty, and a frightened face — a real face, not a blurred nothingness — beneath Gamine's blue veils. Memories of strange hunts and a big bird on the pommel of a high saddle. A bird hooded like a falcon, in crimson.

Consciousness of dress made me remember the — nightshirt — I still wore. Moving swiftly, without conscious thought, I went to a door and slid it open; pulled out some garments and dressed in them. Every garment in the closet was the same color; deep-hued crimson. I glanced

in the mirror and a phrase Gamine had used broke the surface of my mind like a leaping fish. "Lord of the Crimson Tower." Well, I looked it. There had been knives and swords in the closet; I took out one to look at it, and before I realized what I was doing I had belted it across my hip. I stared, decided to let it remain. It looked all right with the rest of the costume. It felt right, too. Another door folded back noiselessly and a man stood looking at me.

He was young and would have been handsome in an effeminate way if his face had not been so arrogant. Lean, somehow catlike, it was easy to determine that he was akin to Adric, or me, even before the automatic habit of memory fitted name and identity to him. "Evarin," I said, warily.

He came forward, moving so softly that for an uneasy moment I wondered if he had pads like a cat's on his feet. He wore deep green from head to foot, similar to the crimson garments that clothed me. His face had a flickering, as if he could at a moment's notice raise a barrier of invisibility like Gamine's about himself. He didn't look as human as I.

"I have seen Gamine," he said. "She says you are awake, and as sane as you ever were. We of Narabedla are not so strong that we can afford to waste even a broken tool like you."

Wrath — Adric's wrath — boiled up in me; but Evarin moved lithely backward. "I am not Gamine," he warned, "And I will not be served like Gamine has been served. Take care."

"Take care yourself," I muttered, knowing little else I could have said. Evarin drew back thin lips. "Why? You have been sent out on the Time Ellipse till you are only a shadow of yourself. But all this is beside the point. Karamy says you are to be freed, so the seals are off all the doors, and the Crimson Tower is no longer a prison to you. Come and go as you please. Karamy —" his lips formed a sneer, "If you call that freedom!"

I said slowly "You think I'm not crazy?"

Evarin snorted. "Except where Karamy is concerned, you never were. What is that to me? I have everything I need. The Dreamer gives me good hunting and slaves enough to do my bidding. For the rest, I am the Toymaker. I need little. But you —" his voice leaped with contempt, "you ride time at Karamy's bidding — and your Dreamer walks — waiting the coming of his power that he may destroy us all one day!"

I stared somberly at Evarin, standing still near the door. The words seemed to wake an almost personal shame in me. The boy watched and his face lost some of his bitterness. He said more quietly "The falcon flown cannot be recalled. I came only to tell you that you are free." He turned, shrugging his thin shoulders, and walked to the window. "As I say, if you call that freedom."

I followed him to the window. The clouds were clearing; the two suns shone with a blinding brilliance. By looking far to the left I could see a line of rainbow-tinted towers that rose into the sky, tall and capped with slender spires. I could distinguish five clearly; one, the nearest, seemed made of a jewelled blue; one, clear emerald green; golden, flame-colored, violet. There were more beyond, but the colors were blurred and dim. They made a semicircle about a wooded park; beyond them the familiar skyline

of the mountains tugged old memories in my brain. The suns swung high in a sky that held no tint of blue, that was as clear and colorless as ice. Abruptly I turned my back on it all. Evarin murmured "Narabedla. Last of the Rainbow Cities. Adric — how long now?"

I did not answer. "Karamy wants me?"

Evarin's laugh was only a soundless shaking of his thin shoulders. "Karamy can wait. Better for you if she waited forever. Come along with me, or Gamine will be back. You don't want to see Gamine, do you?" He sounded anxious; I shook my head. Emphatically, I did not want to see that insidious spook again. "No. Why? Should I?"

Evarin looked relieved. "Come along, then. If I know Gamine, you're pretty well muddled. Amnesiac. I'll explain. After all —" his voice mocked, "you are my brother!"

He thrust open the door and motioned me through. Instinctively I drew back, gesturing him to lead the way; he laughed soundlessly and went, and I followed, letting it slide shut behind me.

We went down stairs and more stairs. I walked at Evarin's side, one part of me wondering why I was not more panicky. I was a stranger in a world gone insane, yet I had that outrageous calmness with which men do fantastic things in a dream. I was simply taking one step after another; knowing what to do with that part of me that was Adric. Gamine had spoken of habit patterns, the convolutions of the brain. I had Adric's body. Only a superficial me, an outer ego, was still a strange, muddled Mike Kenscott. The subconscious Adric was guiding me. I let him ride I felt it would be wise to be very much Adric around Evarin. We stepped into an elevator shaft which went down, curved around corners with a speed that threw me against the wall, then began, slowly, to rise. I had long since lost all sense of direction. Abruptly the door of the shaft opened and we began to walk along a long, brilliantly illuminated passage. From somewhere we heard singing; a voice somewhere in the range of a trained boy's voice or a woman's mature contralto. Gamine's voice I could make no sense of the words; but Evarin halted to listen, swearing in a whisper. I thought the faraway voice sang my name and Evarin's, but I could not tell. "What is it, Evarin?"

He gave a short exclamation, the sense of which was lost on me.

"Come along," he said irritably, "It is only the spell-singer, singing old Rhys back to sleep. You waked him this time, did you not? I wonder Gamine permitted it. He is very near his last sleep — old Rhys. I think you will send him there soon." Without giving me a chance to answer — and for that matter, I had no answer ready — he pulled me aside between recessed walls and again the shaft in which we stood began to ride. Eventually we stepped into a room at the top of another tower, a room lavishly, even garishly furnished. Evarin flung himself carelessly on a divan embroidered in silken purple and gestured me to follow his example. "Well, now tell me. Where in Time has Karamy sent you now?"

"Karamy?" I asked tentatively. Evarin's raucous laugh rang out again. He said with seeming irrelevance, but with an odd air of confiding "My one demand of the Dreamer is — freedom from that witch's spells. Some day I shall fashion a Toy for her. I am not the Toymaker of Narabedla for noth-

ing. I demand little enough of the Dreamers, Zandru knows! I do not like to pay their price, but Karamy does not care what she pays. So —" he made a spreading movement of his hands, "she has power over everyone, except me. Yes; assuredly I must make her a Toy. She sent you out on the Time Ellipse. I wonder who brought you back?"

I shook my head. "I've been out of my body too long. I can't remember much."

"You remember me," Evarin said. "I wonder why she left you that? Karamy's amnesia-rays took the rest of your memory. She never trusted me that far before."

But I caught the crafty look in his face. I knew only this about Evarin; Karamy was right not to trust him. I said "I only remember your name. Nothing more."

Because Evarin — I knew — was never ten minutes the same. He would profess friendship and mean friendship; ten minutes later, still in friendship, he would flay the skin from my body and count it only an exquisite joke. I did not like those perverted and subtle eyes. He seemed to read my thought. "Good, we will be strangers. Brothers are too —" he let the word trail off, unfinished. "What have you forgotten?"

Could I trust him wth my terrible puzzlement? How much could I, as Adric — and I must be Adric to him — get along without knowing? What was even more to the point, how many questions could I dare ask without betraying my own helplessness? I compromised. "What are the Dreamers?"

That **had** been the wrong question.

"Zandru, Adric, you have been far indeed! You must have been back before the Cataclysm! Well — our forefathers, after the Cataclysm, ruled this planet and built the Rainbow Cities. That was before the Compact that killed machines. Some people say the Dreamers were born from the dead machines."

He began to pace the floor restlessly. "They were men — once," he said, "They are born from men and women. Mendel knows what caused them. But one in every ten million men is such a freak — a Dreamer. Some say they came out of the Cataclysm; some say they are the souls of the dead Machines. They are human — and not human. They were telepaths. They could control everything — things, minds, people. They could throw illusions around things and men — they contested our rules."

He sat down; his voice became brooding, quiet. "One of us, here in Rainbow City, a dozen generations ago, found a way to bind the Dreamers," he said. "We could not kill them; they were deathless, normally. But we could bind them in sleep. As they slept, under a forced stasis, we could make them give up their powers - - to us. So that we controlled the things they controlled. For a price." There was a glimpse of horror behind his eyes. "You know the price. It is high."

I kept silent. I wanted Evarin to go on.

He shivered a little, shook his head and the horror vanished. "So each of us has a Dreamer of his own who can grant him power to do as he wills. And after years and years, as the Dreamers grow old, they grow mortal. They can be killed. And fewer are born, now; fewer to each generation. As they grow older and weaker, it is safe to let them wake; but never too strongly, or too long." He laughed, bitterly. A fury came

from nowhere into his face.

"And you loosed a Dreamer!" he cried. "A Dreamer with all his power hardly come upon him! He is harmless as yet - - but he wakes, and he walks! And one day the power will come upon him - - and he will destroy us all!" Evarin's thin features were drawn with despair; not arrogant, now, but full of suffering. "A Dreamer - - " he sighed, "A Dreamer, and you had been made one with him already! Can you see now why we do not trust you - - brother?"

Without answering I rose and went to the window. This window did not look on the neat little park, but on a vast tract of wild country. Far away, curious trails of smoke spiralled up into the sunlight and a wispy fog lay in the bottomlands.

"Down there," said Evarin in a low voice, "Down there the Dreamer walks and waits! Down there - - "

But I did not hear the rest, for my mind completed it. Down there - -

Down there is my lost memory. Down there was my life.

Somewhere down there I had left my soul.

CHAPTER THREE

Flowers of Danger

I turned my back on the window. "Rhys is a Dreamer." I said with slow certainty. "What is Gamine?"

Evarin nodded slowly, ignoring the question. "Rhys is a Dreamer, yes. He is old - - so old he is almost mortal now; so he wakes, and he too walks. But he was one of us once - the only Dreamer ever born within the Rainbow City. His loyalty is double; but he will never harm Narabedla, because he is of our blood." Evarin cleared his throat. "So Gamine takes what knowledge can be had from his old. old mind. And does not pay"

"Who is Gamine?" I asked again. Evarin still hesitated.

"Karamy hates Gamine," he said, after minutes, "So no man sees Gamine's face. I would not ask too many questions - - unless you ask them of Karamy." A smile flickered on the mobile features, "Ask Karamy," he said gleefully, "She will tell!"

"She will?" I said stupidly, because I could think of nothing else to say. Evarin's grin was delicately malicious. "Oh, I am sure of that! Karamy is quick to strike Gamine and I have little love lost, but we agree on one thing; that Karamy's procession of slaves is monstrous. And that you are a fool to help Karamy pay for her - - desires. Karamy is far too fond of power in her own hands, to pay to put it into yours."

Karamy. Karamy who took my memory - -

"She did," Evarin murmured, and I realized I had spoken aloud The room seemed full of a weighty silence. Evarin's prowling footsteps made no noise as he came to my side. "I can give it back to you, though. I have made you a Toy." His effete voice rather disgusted me, and I moved away, but he followed. "Look here, and find your memory."

And he put something small and hard into my hand; something wrapped in silvery silks.

I raised my hand curiously, untwisting the wrappings. They were smooth and shining and colorless, with a bluish cast, like Gamine's veils; no fabric I had ever seen. Evarin backed slowly away from me. For an instant all I could see was a blurred invisibility - - like Gamine's face behind the veils - - then a sort of mirror became slowly visi-

ble. It did not seem to reflect anything; rather, it was a coldly shining surface, cloudy, glittering from within. I bent to examine the pattern of the shadows that moved on the surface. There was a curious pull from the mirror, a cold that crept sluggishly from my hand. A familiar, soothing cold. As if drawn by a magnet, my eyes bent closer - -

Recognition crashed in my mind. Evarin - - and his gilt deadly Toys : . I dashed the colorless thing to the floor, giving it a savage kick. The blurred invisibility wavered; I caught a glimpse of a tiny jewelled mechanism, before it sprang back to gray ice again. Evarin had backed halfway across the room; I leaped at him, collaring the dandy and wrenching him close. "I've a good mind to tie the thing across your throat!" I grated.

Evarin's lip twisted up. Suddenly his whole face melted in a blurring invisibility and I felt his whole substance evaporate from between my hands. He writhed like smoke, and I leaped backward just as he materialized, whole and deadly, too close. "I am always - -guarded!" he jerked out at me, "I might have known - - "

He stooped, reaching for the fallen toy. I kicked the little mirror out of his reach, bent to retrieve it. "I'll keep this," I said, and wadding the insulated silk around it, I thrust it into a pocket. Evarin's eyes glared at me helplessly. "You'll stay solid for awhile now," I jeered. "Toymaker! Damned freak - - " I stormed out of the room, leaving him rubbing his bruised shoulder.

Now that Adric was back in control, I had no trouble discovering where I wanted to go. Some blind instinct led me through the maze of elevators and staircases; I stepped into servant's quarters, kitchens, a roomful of buzzing machinery I dismissed with a glance of familiarity; and finally found myself in the open. the semicircle of rainbow towers around me.

Overhead the suns, red and white, sent a curious, double-shadowed light downward through the neatly-trimmed trees. A little day moon, smaller than any moon I had known, peeped, a curious crescent, over the edge of a mountain. The grass under my feet was just grass, but the brightly-tinted flowers in mathematically regular beds were strange to me. Paths, bordered by narrow ditches to keep the pedestrian off the flowers, wandered in and out of this strange pleasaunce; I accepted all this without conscious thought, but some unconscious scrap of memory gave me a vague practical reason for the ditches. I carefully avoided them

Faint shrill music tugged siren-like at my ears; wordless, like Gamine's crooning. Staring, I realized that the flowers themselves sang. The singing flowers of Karamy's garden - I remembered their lotus song. A song of welcome? Or of danger?

I was not alone in the garden. Men, kilted and belted in the same gaudy red and gold as the flowers, passed and repassed restlessly, unquiet as chained flames. For a moment the old vanity turned uppermost in my mind. For all her slaves, all her - - lovers, Karamy paid tribute to the Lord of the Crimson Tower! Paid - - would continue to pay!

The men passed me, silent. They were sworded, but their swords were blunt, like children's toys; they were a regiment of corpses, of zombies. Their salutes as I passed were jerky, mechanical.

A high note sang suddenly in the

flowers; I felt, not heard, their empty parading cease. In a weird ballet they ranged themselves into blind lines that filed away nowhere; toy soldiers, all alike.

And between the backs of the toy-soldiers and the patterned, painted flowers, I saw a man running. Another me, from another world, thought briefly of the card-soldiers, flat on their faces in the Red Queen's garden. Wonderland. I heard myself say, with half-conscious amusement "They all look so alike until you turn them over!"

The man running between the ditched flower-beds was no dummy from a pack of cards. I saw him beckon, still running. He called to me; to Adric.

"Adric! Karamy walks here - - just listen to the flowers! I was afraid I'd have to get all the way into the tower to find you!" His voice was urgent, breathless; he slid to a stop not three feet from me. "Narayan knew they'd freed you! He's outside the gates. He sent me to help. Come on!"

The sight of the man touched another of those live-wires in my brain; the name of Narayan, another still. "Narayan - -" I said in dull recognition. The word, on my lips, hit a chord of fear, of dread and danger - -

But I had come straight from Evarin. I knew the man; I knew the response he expected, but the brief glimpse into Evarin's mirror had set up a chain of actions I could not control. I tried to put out my hand in friendly greeting; instead I felt, with horror, my fingers at my belt and tried, without success, to halt the sword that flew without volition from its sheath. The man backed away, his eyes full of terror. "Adric - - no - - the Sign - - " he held up one arm, deprecatingly, then howled with agony, clutching the severed fingers. I heard my own voice, savage, inhuman, the thin laughter of Evarin snarling through it. "Sign?? There's a sign for you!"

The man threw himself out of range; but his face, convulsed with pain, held a stunned bewilderment. "Adric - - Narayan promised - you were sane - -" he breathed

I forced my sword back into the scabbard, staring without comprehension at the blood from the wound I had inflicted, and at the darting heads of the flowers. I could not kill this man who carried the name of Narayan on his tongue.

The flowers twitched - - stirred - - threw tendrils at the man's bleeding hand. A quick nausea tightened my throat; I motioned urgently to him.

"Run!" I begged, "Quick, or I can't - - "

The flowers shrilled. The man threw back his head, his eyes wide with panic, and screamed.

"Karamy! Ailieeeee —!" he staggered back wildy, teetering on the edge of the ditch. I cried another warning, incoherent — but too late. He trod on the flowers — stumbled across the little ditch. The writhing flower-heads shot up shoulder-high. They screamed a wild paean of flower-music, and he fell among them, sprawling, floundering helplessly. I heard him scream, hoarsely, horribly — I turned my eyes away. There was a wild thrashing, a flailing, a yell that died and echoed among the brilliant towers. There was a sort of purring murmur from the blossoms.

Then the flowers stilled and were quiet, waving innocently behind their ditches.

Karamy, gold and fire, walked along the winding path through the trees. And in the space of a

second I forgot the man who lay lifeless in the bed of the terrible flowers.

Karamy was all gold. From her glowing crown of hair to the tips of her little slippers, she was one sunny shimmer; there was amber on her brows and at her throat, and an amber rod twisted lightly between her fingers, its delicate movement outlining my face. Karamy's smile of welcome was a dream which made me know I could be well content if this were my world.

But old habit made me turn my face away; her eyes, cat-eyes of wide yellow, watched me slyly, but her face was turned to the sprawled man in the flowers. "So? I thought I heard — something." Without taking her eyes from my face, she spun the lucent rod. The flower-song rose again, a soft keening wail. Two of the silent guards moved noiselessly through the garden, and at an expressive movement of the rod, they lifted the corpse and bore it away. The music died. The woman's hands went out to pull me close.

"Adric, Adric! As soon as you are free, they pursue you! That is not what you want, is it?"

"Isn't it?" I asked shortly. I still could not look full at the cat-eyes, the caressing face. A memory scuttled, rabbit-fashion, across my mind, giving name and identity to the man I had betrayed to the flowers.

Karamy slid in front of me so I had to look at her, and the lovely lazy voice murmured the name I was beginning to know. "You are angry," the soft voice caressed me, "I knew it was not right to let Evarin near you! Adric, we need you, Narabedla needs you! We felt betrayed when you left us, when you shut yourself up alone with your stars! Have you forgotten, or are you still — my lover?"

It rang phony! Phony, was the way I put it to myself. Part of me felt like calling her a lying she-devil and having that much, at least, on record.. But I was fast acquiring a double cunning. The animal cunning of Adric's old habit — and a desperate, trapped cunning of my own, born of a desperate fear of this unfamiliar world. There was nothing I could do except ride on the surface and let my hunches take me where they would. Karamy was very soft and sweet and something more than lovely in my arms and I held her crushingly close while I struggled with a memory. Who was Karamy? Who — and what — was I?

Karamy dropped her arms. The mantle of lazy seductiveness dropped with them. She spoke with eager annoyance. "You are still angry because I sent you on the Time Ellipse! You do not know it was for your own good — you haven't learned your lesson yet —"

That talk meant danger for me. I could think of only one way to silence it. She seemed to like it; but even with her lips acquiescent under mine, I was wary. Was I fooling her — or was she only playing my own game, and playing it a little better?

"Now we can make plans," she said a little later, "First, Gamine." She looked sharply at me, but I kept my face expressionless. "Gamine is always with the old Dreamer; she lets him wake; he will grow too strong. We must send Rhys away from Narabedla. Gamine may stay or follow him to exile. But Rhys must go."

"Rhys must go," I conceded.

"He should be slain, but Gamine will never do it," said Karamy with a shrug that disposed of Rhys.

"Evarin —" she snapped her jeweled fingers. "His Dreamer sleeps sound! Evarin fears even his own power! My Dreamer grows strong — but he serves me!" The beautiful face looked ruthless and savage. "Your Dreamer walks — free in the forest! Only you can re-bind him. You, with my help — Adric of the Crimson Tower!"

Her eyes smoldered. "Yes, and my Dreamer shall serve you as well, till then!" She breathed. "I will pay to put power in your hands!"

The very phrase Evarin had used! A shudder stung me briefly.

Her glowing face burned through my sting of fear. "I go to the Dreamer this night, Adric! Ride with me, and he shall lead you where the Dreamer walks — and lead you back to power! I have said enough —" the lambent eyes tilted at me, "Have I not?"

She had, and too much. For I knew now how the Dreamer must be paid. And the small part of me that was still Mike Kenscott cowered; the rest of me accepted the memory with a shrug It was this Adric part that spoke "I'll go And afterward, I'll go into the forest where the Dreamer walks — and bring him back to you!"

But even as I swept Karamy into my arms and bent her head back roughly under my mouth, a warning prickle iced my spine. I said, insinuatingly "And then, Karamy ——" but my eyes narrowed over her golden head.

Karamy had tricked me before this.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trapped!

Afterward, when I had found my way back to the Crimson Tower, I searched for hours for something that might give a clue to Adric's mystifying past. I was puzzled about this Adric who came and went as he pleased in the chambers of my memory. But I found nothing; whoever had stolen Adric's memory, had made sure that nothing in his surroundings should clear up the puzzle in his mind. I knew only one thing. Adric was feared, disliked, distrusted by all the Narabedlans, and all except Gamine had something to gain by feigning friendship. I could not decide whether Karamy's attitude was love that pretended contempt to mold Adric, or me, to her will, or contempt that pretended love for the same reason. And although habit found affection for Evarin, I could not trust him long. Trust a cyclone sooner than that half-mad effeminate! The name, **Nārayan**, stuck burrlike in my mind Friend, or enemy?

I sat at the barred window of Adric's high room, trying to force memory from the alien mind in which I was prisoner. And whether it was sheer effort of will, or the result of the fragmentary look in Evarin's mirror, or whether, as Gamine insisted, I was really Adric and Mike Kenscott was a mere superficial illusion of my conscious mind, memory did begin to pulse back.

In the early days .....

In the early days, before the vagueness came on my mind, I, Adric of the Crimson Tower, had been a power in the Rainbow City. The memories of that time were not the kind Mike Kenscott would have cared to own, but I, as Adric, found them vastly pleasing. Unlike Gamine, who loved only knowledge, or Evarin, who toyed with pleasure and trickery, I had wanted power. I had it, unlimited, from a Dreamer who stirred only vaguely in sleep. Half the known portions of this

world had known the Crimson Tower as lord. And Karamy —

Some memories were triumphant. Some were humorous in Adric's cynical mind. Some were terrible beyond guessing — for Adric had not counted cost, and even he shuddered from the price the Dreamer had exacted.

Then, to this wilful and wild man, something had happened. I had no idea what; Karamy had reached that far back and blurred, though not entirely erased, my memory. It had something to do with a blonde boy's face, lifted in incredulous terror — or joy; and a fleeing form, veiled, that retreated down the long corridor of my mind, averting its face as I followed. Whatever had happened, it had come when Adric was sick with blood and horror, when he was surfeited, even if momentarily, with conquest, and sickened at the price the Dreamer extorted. The power, forced through the mind of the Dreamer, called for energy; kinetic energy, available from one source and one only. Adric had fed the Dreamer with that power. For a while.

One day, as a whim, I had redeemed a young woman slave — then the vagueness came and choked me. I might think; I might burst my brain, but so far and no farther my memories would carry me. I **could not** force memory of that chain of events. But after that, Adric's reign had collapsed like the unstable arch it had been. His armies scattered, and he had shut himself up or been imprisoned in his Tower; his memories had been stolen and he had gone, or been sent, spinning along a time line forward, or perhaps back, until somewhere in the abyss of time he touched Mike Kenscott.

It had been then, perhaps, that Adric had escaped. He had reached, drawn Mike Kenscott back — and switched the two. It was a perfect escape from a life Adric had come to hate.

But I was Adric. There was an explanation for that, too. The physical body could not make the transit in time. I had Adric's body; the convolutions of his brain, the synaptic links of habit. His memory banks. Only the Ego, the superimposed pattern of the conscious identity, insisted I was Mike Kenscott. In Adric's body, the old patterns ruled, and to all intents and purposes, I was Adric. And back in my own time, I thought, Adric was living in my body — living Mike Kenscott's life, going through the motions, with only the same queer lapses I was making here. And after a while, even these would stop. I was wholly trapped. Here, living Adric's life, the part of me that was Adric would grow stronger and stronger till — he? —unseated the other identity wholly. And he, in my body? Andy, I thought with a wild swift fear, **what will he do to Andy?**

Nothing. He could not hurt Andy — not in my pattern — any more than I could hate Evarin. Or could he?

I had to get back! God, I **had** to get back!

When the white sun had set and the red sun glowed a darkening ember across the Sierra, a summons came, brought by one of Karamy's toy-soldier cohorts. I dressed — in crimson again, for there was no other clothing anywhere — and followed the voiceless sentry down through a labyrinth of elevators, finally emerging into a long corridor. I strode down it, hearing my own steps echo; a second rhythm joined them imperceptibly, and Ga-

mine stole out of the darkness, swathed in the luminous veiling, creeping noiselessly as a ghost behind me. Later I became conscious of Evarin's padding cat-steps behind Gamine, trailing us, single-file. And other figures came from darkened recesses to stretch the silent parade; a slim girl in a winged cloak, flame color; a dwarfed man who walked beneath the amethyst huddle of purple cap and furs. Memory fitted names to them, but I did not speak to them, or they to me.

After a long time, the immense corridor began to tilt upward, climbing toward a glimmer of light at the end. Without realizing it I had swung into an arrogant, loping stride; now I brushed away the slave-soldier who headed the column and took the lead myself. Behind me the others fell into place as if I had bidden them; the flame-clothed girl in the winged cloak, the cat-footed Evarin, the dwarf bent in his jester's cap, Gamine in the blue shroud. Without warning, we came out into a vast court; an enclosed space, yet wide as the outdoors, a yard, a plaza, a place of imposing grandeur. A place of memory.

The red sun above us glowed like a lurid coal. There were tall pillars on three sides of the courtyard, and at the far end, a vaulted archway led into a treelined drive that stretched away for miles into the twilight. Between two pillars, Karamy waited; slim, shimmering golden from head to foot. A hungry impatience sparked in her cat's eyes. "You're late."

"I'm ready," I said. What I was ready for, I was not sure.

Karamy waved an impatient signal to the Narabedlans who were coming up. "Adric is with us again," she said in her curious lazy voice, "Your allegiance to Adric — children of the Rainbow!"

I stood at her side, mute, waiting; a guard of silent men behind us. "Lord Idris;" Karamy summoned. The hunchback came to bow jerkily before us. "Welcome home — Lord!"

The girl in flame-color darted to where we stood and her dipping curtsy was like the waver of a moth toward a flame. "Adric —" she murmured. The wings of her cloak lifted and fluttered across her shoulders as if they would fly of themselves. She was a shy thing, and her dark hair waved softly as if it too were winged. I touched her fingers lightly, but under the smolder of Karamy's gaze I let her go. She watched me, shyly, with averted face.

Evarin's face was slyly malicious, but his voice was pure silk. "It is — pleasure to follow you again, my brother," he almost purred, and I scowled at the mockery at his face and refused his offered hand. Only Gamine said nothing, coming forward on gliding feet to bow briefly and retire; but the silver-sweet, sexless voice of the spell-singer murmured in a singing, almost wordless, croon.

"Save your spells, Gamine," said Karamy savagely, and Evarin jerked round at the shrouded form, but Gamine heeded neither of them, and the sweet contralto chanting went on.

From somewhere the silent men brought horses. Horses — here, in this nightmare world? I had never been on a horse in my life. I found myself vaulting, with a nice coordination of movement, into the saddle. The courtyard, for all the bustle of department, seemed to hold the silence of a grave. Karamy kept me close to her. When we were all mounted, she threw the amber

rod upward, and the last rays of the red sun caught its rays and sent a pure shaft of light down the darkened alleyway lined with trees. At the sight of that gleam, a curiously familiar emotion stole through me. I threw up one arm over my head, mimicking Karamy's gesture. "Ride!" I shouted.

And the flying steeds kept pace with mine.

The driveway under the arch of trees led for miles under the thick boughs. Through the easy drumming of hooves, I could still hear the sweet distant sound of Gamine's singing, which floated on the wind, keeping pace with the rise and fall of the rolling road, in a quick cadence. The wind whipped Karamy's golden hair like a halo about her head. I glanced over my shoulder to where the rainbow towers stood, now black, silhouetted against the greater darkness of the mountains. Overhead in the pink sky, the crescent of the tiny moon was brightening, and lower in the sky I saw another, wider disc, nearly at full. Cold air was stinging my cheeks and nipping my bones with frost, and I felt the sparks struck from hooves beating on the frozen ground.

Cold! Yet in Karamy's garden flowers had glowed in a tropical glory —

And for a moment, it was entirely Mike Kenscott — sick, bewildered and panicky — who glanced about him with horror, feeling the swirling cold and a colder chill from the golden sorceress at my side. It was Mike Kenscott's will that jerked at the reins of the big gelding to end this farce now —

"What is it?" Karamy cried, over the noise of the hooves.

And I heard my own voice, raised above the galloping rhythm, cry back "Nothing!" and call out a command to the horse.

Good God! I was Mike Kenscott — but prisoner in a body that would not obey me — a mind that persisted in thoughts and habits I could not share, a — soul? — that would carry me to destruction! I was Mike Kenscott — trapped on a nightmare ride through hell!

CHAPTER FIVE

Where the Dreamer Walks

I had been scared before. Now I was panicked, wild with a nerve-destroying fright. I'm not a coward. I set up a radar transmitter in Okinawa within ninety feet of a nest of Japs. That was something real. I could face it. But under two suns and a pair of little moons, with weird people I knew were not human — all right; I was a coward. I steadied myself in the saddle, trying with every scrap of my will to calm myself. If this was a nightmare, well, I'd had some beauties —

But it wasn't. I knew that. The frost hurting my face, the sound of shod steel on stones, the vivid colors around me, told me I was wide awake. Dreams are not technicolored. And through all this I was riding hell-for-leather, my knees gripped on the saddle, guiding the horse with the grip of my thighs — and I'd never been on a horse's back in my life. Rode — and rode —

We had ridden about seven miles, and stopped twice to breathe the horses, but we were still beneath the great archway of trees. The sky's pink sunset light had faded; the land was flooded with a blue, fluorescent starlight, a light I'd never seen before. I strained my eyes upward through the black foliage. I suppose I had some confused idea of guessing when I was by the stars. But the view to the North was

hidden by mountains, and I don't know one constellation from another, with that single exception. A glance at Karamy, in this fright, un-nerved me; I touched the reins, dropped back till I rode between Gamine and the girl in flame-color. "Adric," the spell-singer saluted coolly, and the girl in the winged cloak threw back her hood; I saw dark eyes watching me from a pure, sweet young face Before the luminous innocence of those eyes I wanted to cry out in protest. I was not Adric, warlock of Narabedla. I was just a poor guy named Mike, I was just — me. I rode beside Gamine for minutes, trying to think what I would say.

Gamine's musical voice was not raised, yet it carried perfectly to my ears. "You seem wholly yourself again."

I didn't answer. What was there to say? Still, there seemed to be sympathy in the sharply-edged tones. "You will remember — perhaps too much — at the Dreamer's Keep."

"Gamine," I asked, "Who is Narayan?"

I saw the blue robes quiver a little; across from Gamine, I saw a curious flickering look pass across the face of the girl in the orange winged cloak. But Gamine's answer was perfectly even and disinterested. "The name is not familiar to me. Have you heard it, Cynara?"

The girl did not answer, only moved her dark head a little.

"I should know," I mused But the name **Cynara** had touched another of those live wires within my mind. Narayan Cynara. Cynara and Narayan! If I could only remember! Suddenly I turned. "Gamine — who are you?" Gamine sat quiet, eerily motionless on the tall horse. The robed figure seemed to blend into the starlit shadows around us. I had the sudden feeling of having re-lived this moment before, then the veiled shoulders twitched impatiently.

"Is this an inquisition?"

Rebuked, and stung by the arrogant voice, I touched my heel to my horse's flank and rode forward to rejoin Karamy. Gamine! The hell with Gamine!

For several minutes the road had been climbing, and now we topped the summit of a little rise and abruptly the trees came to an end. By tacit consent we all drew our horses to a walk. We stood atop the lip of a broad bowl of land, perhaps thirty miles across, filled to the brim with thick dark forest. Far out in this valley lay a cleared space, and in the center of that space lay a great tower; but not a slender and fairylike spire like the Towers of Rainbow City. This was a massive donjon thrusting heavy shoulders upward into the moon-washed sky.

The Keep of the Dreamers.

Something in me murmured "This is the forest where the Dreamer walks!" — or had the murmured voice come from Gamine, motionless behind me? Karamy rode eagerly, her face drawn tautly together, her slim tanned hands clenched on the reins. All this while I was Mike Kenscott—but a Mike who watched himself without knowing what he would do next, like those puzzling nightmares where a man is both actor and audience to some mummery being played. I watched myself say and do things as if I were two men at once. In effect, I suppose I was ..... Karamy turned in her saddle, facing me.

"Adric," she murmured, "Lead me where the Dreamer walks!"

I knew, with a sudden surety, that because of some bond between the

freed Dreamer and myself, I could do this. But again, something outside myself told me what to say. "That bond is broken, Karamy. Did you not break it yourself? How can I guide you then?" And for my reward I saw unsureness leap in her cat's eyes. That shot had told Karamy had been guessing, then!

The answer had shaken her. But this woman was a past mistress at subtlety. She murmured "It can be forged again. That I swear."

Ah, but I knew how far to trust even Karamy's oaths!

We had dipped down into the bowl of forest and we were riding through thick woods, along a road that struggled windingly, with many curves and sharp corners. Adric knew this country; his knowledge made Mike Kenscott shiver. He had hunted here, and for no fourlegged game. As if Karamy read my thoughts I hear her low laughter. "So. My wrist aches for the feel of a falcon. We'll hunt here again — soon, you and I!" I was partly bewildered by her words, but they gave me a shivering excitement, an insidious thrill.

Behind me, I heard Gamine's chanting take on a new note. The words were still indistinguishable, but the very tune screamed warning. A pulse began to twitch jerkily in my neck.

Without any warning, the road twisted. Karamy and I spurred our horses and rounded the curve in one swift, racing burst of speed —

— and were fairly in the trap before we knew it.

It was the agonized whinny of my horse, and the jolt of my body righting itself automatically from the plunging animal beneath me, that made me realize we had ridden straight on a chevaux-de-frise. I yelled, cursing, shouting to Karamy to get back, get back, but her own momentum carried her on; I saw her light body fly out of the saddle and disappear. The others, rounding the curve in a wild dash, were fairly on the barrier already, and the place was a bedlam, a scramble, with riderless horses milling in a melee of curses and the screaming of women and the threshing of feet I was out of my saddle in an instant, thrusting Gamine's mount back from the stabbing points fixed invisibly against the dark barrier in the road, shouting to Evarin and Idris. Evarin leaped to my side, catching at Karamy's wild horse, while I tore madly at the barrier where the woman had been thrown. Idris bore down on me, mounted. "Go round!" he shouted. I plunged through the underbrush at the side of the road, with hasty feet twice snaked by long creepers. Past the barrier, the road lay open and deserted, and Karamy lay in a shimmer of crumpled silk, motionless. "Gamine, Evarin —" I bellowed, "No one's here! Quick, Karamy is hurt —"

The head and shoulders of Idris' horse thrust through the thick brushwood. "Is she dead?" the dwarf muttered. I bent, thrusting my hand to her breasts. "Her heart's beating. Only stunned. Get down," I ordered. Idris scrambled, monkey-fashion, from the saddle. I lifted the woman in my arms, but she did not move or open her eyes. Idris touched my arm.

"Put her on the saddle," he suggested, and together we laid her across the pommel. Suddenly, the dwarf cried out.

"What?" I asked sharply.

"I hear —"

I never knew what Idris heard. His head vanished, as if snatched away by a giant's hand; a rough

grip collared me, choking fingers clawed at my throat, a thousand rockets went off in my head and I lay sprawling in the brushwood, eating dust, with an elephant sitting on my chest and threatening hands gouging my throat. My last coherent thought before the breath went out of me, was —

"I'm waking up!"

CHAPTER SIX

Narayan

But I wasn't. When I came to — it could only have been a few seconds that I was unconscious — it was to hear Evarin snarling curses and Idris barking incoherently with rage. I heard Karamy screaming my name, and started to answer, but the steely fingers were still at my throat and with that weight on top of me, I hadn't a chance. The fall, or something, had knocked Adric clean out of me. I was fuzzy-brained, but sane. I was an innocent bystander again.

I could see Evarin and Idris in the road, casting wary glances at the brushwood all around them. I could just make out the face of the man who was holding me pinned to the earth with his body. He had the general build of a hippopotamus and a face to match. I squirmed, but the theatening face came closer and I subsided. The man could have broken me in two like a match.

Around me in the thicket were dozens of crouching forms, fantastic snipers with weapons at their shoulders. Weapons that could have been crossbows or disintegrators, or both. "Enter Buck Rogers," I thought wearily. I was beginning to feel faint again, and old welter-weight on my stomach didn't help any. Abruptly he moved, delicate fingers knotting a gag in my gasping mouth; then the intolerable weight on my chest was suddenly gone and I sucked in air with relief. The fat man eased himself cautiously up, and I felt a steel point caress my lowest rib. The threat didn't need words. I could see the Narabedlans gathered, a tight little knot in the road. The snipers around me were still holding their weapons, but the fat man commanded in a low voice "Don't fire! They're sure to have guards riding behind them —" the voice died to a rasping mutter, and I lay motionless, trying to dredge up some of Adric's memories that might help; but the only thing I got was a fleeting memory of my own football days and a flying tackle by a Penn State halfback that had knocked me ten feet. Adric was gone; clean gone.

The Narabedlans were talking in low tones, Gamine the rallying-point round which they clustered. Evarin had his sword out, but even he did not step toward the mantling thicket. Cynara was holding Evarin's arm, protesting wildly. "No, no, no, no! They'll kill Adric—"

Suddenly, between two breaths, the road was alive with mounted men. Who they were, I never knew; I was quickly dragged to my feet and jerked away. Behind me I heard shouting, and steel, and saw thin flashes of colored flame Spots of black danced before my eyes as I stumbled along between two captors. I felt my sword dragged from my scabbard. Oh well, I thought wryly, now that Adric's run out on the party I don't know how to use it anyway.

Under the impetus of a knife I found myself clambering awkwardly into a saddle, felt the horse running beneath me. There wasn't a chance of getting away, and the frying pan couldn't be much worse than

the fire, anyway.

Behind us the noises of battle died away. The horse I rode raced, surefooted, into the darkness. I hung on with both hands to keep from falling; only Adric's habitual reflexes kept me from tumbling ignominiously to the ground. I don't think I had any more coherent thoughts until the jolting rhythm broke and we came out of the forest into full moonlight and a glare of open fires.

I raised my head and looked around me. We were in a grove, tree-ringed like a Druid temple, lit by watch-fires and the waver of torches. Tents sprouted in the clearing, giving it an untidy, gypsy appearance; at the back was a white frame house with a flat roof and wide doors, but no windows.

Men and women were coming out of the tents everywhere. The talk was a Pentecost of tongues, but I heard one name, repeated over and over again.

"Narayan! Narayan!" the shouts clamored

A slim young man, blonde, dressed in rough brown, came from one of the larger tents and walked deliberately toward me. The crowd drew back, widening to let him approach; before he came within twenty yards he made a signal to one of the men to untie my gag and let me down. I stood, clinging to the saddle, exhausted; the young man came forward until he could almost have touched me, and studied my face dispassionately. At last he raised his head, turning to the fat man, my captor.

"This isn't Adric," he said. "This man is a stranger."

I should have been relieved; I don't know why I wasn't. Instead, my first reaction was bewilderment and angry annoyance. How could he tell that? I was as furiously embarrassed as if I'd been accused of wearing stolen clothing. My beefy captor was as angry as I was. "What do you mean, this isn't Adric?" he demanded belligerently, "We took him right out of their accursed cavalcade! If it isn't Adric, who is it?"

"I wish I knew," Narayan muttered under his breath. His eyes, still fixed on my face, were level, disconcerting. He was tall and straightly built, with pale blonde hair cut square around his shoulders like a squire from a Provencal ballad, and grey eyes that looked grave, but friendly. I liked his looks, but he had a trace of the uncanny stillness I'd noticed in old Rhys, in Gamine. For a moment I decided to tell my whole fantastic story to this man with the grave eyes. He would surely believe it. But to my surprise, he spoke and called me Adric, definitely, as if he had forgotten his doubts.

"Adric," he said, "Do you still remember me? Or did Karamy take that too?"

I sighed. I didn't dare tell the truth, and I felt too chilled and exhausted and disoriented to lie convincingly. Yet lie I must, and do it well.

The fat man scowled and fronted Narayan. "Karamy — Zandru's eyelashes!" he growled. "Look you, did Brennan come back this afternoon? He knows his way around Rainbow city. Ask Adric what happened to Brennan!"

The clamoring broke out around us again, but Narayan never took his eyes from my face as he answered gently "There is always danger, Raif. Blame no man unjustly. Brennan knew he faced all the dangers of Rainbow City. And even Adric is not to blame if a she-witch has him under her spells."

"Traitor!" Raif snarled at me and spat.

I loosed the saddle-horn and stepped dizzily forward. "You might try asking me," I said with a weary anger.

"Are you Adric of the Crimson Tower?" fat Raif snapped.

"I don't know —" I said tiredly. "I don't know, I don't know!"

Narayan's eyes met mine in skeptical puzzlement. Abruptly he put out one hand and took my wrist in a firm grip. "We can't talk here, whoever you are," he said. "Come along."

He led me through the thinning crowd into the frame house at the grove's edge; Raif and one other man trailed after us, the rest clustering hive-fashion around the door. Inside, in a great timbered room, a fire burned and glowing globes chased away darkness. I went gratefully toward the fire; I was stiff with riding and I felt chilled and stupid and empty with the cold. From a wood settle near the fire, a woman rose. She was slight and dark and around her shoulders the luminescent shimmer of her winged cloak flowed like another flame. Cynara.

"Adric —" she said half-aloud, holding out her hands. I took them, partly because she seemed to expect it, partly because the girl seemed the only thing real in a world gone haywire. She flung her arms suddenly around my neck and held herself to me with a shy deliberation. "Adric, Adric, Adric —" she begged, "I slipped away in the dark — I suppose Gamine knows — but they'll never find me here, no, never —"

Narayan's hand pulled the girl sternly away from me; she shrank before the annoyance in his eyes. "Please — Narayan, no —"

The blonde man looked at her without speaking for long moments. At last he said gravely "Sister, you must go back to Narabedla. I would not make you go if there was another way; but you must, for a time." He beckoned to one of the men. "Kerrel —" he commanded, "Take Cynara back to Rainbow-City, but don't get caught. Cynara; tell them you were lost in the woods, or that you were caught and escaped."

The childish mouth trembled, and she turned to me appealingly, but I gave a little shrug. What was I supposed to do? Narayan gave Cynara a gentle push. "Go with Kerrel, little sister," he ordered in a quiet voice; Kerrel took her arm and they hurried out of the room, the winged cloak she wore fluttering on her shoulders. Narayan motioned to Raif to follow them through the door. "I'll talk with him alone."

Raif's thick lips set stubbornly. He looked as if he'd be nasty in a fight. "If he's Adric, and if he's under Karamy's devilments, then —"

"I have faced Adric, and Karamy too," said Narayan with a friendly grin at the man. "Get out, Raif; you're not my bodyguard, or even my nurse!"

The fat man accepted dismissal reluctantly, and Narayan came to my side. There was real friendliness in his grin. "Well," he said, "Now we will talk. You cannot kill me, any more than I could kill you, so we may as well be truthful with each other. Why did you leave us, Adric? What has Karamy done to you this time?"

The room reeled around me. I put out a hand to steady myself — when the dizziness cleared, Narayan's arm was around my shoulders and he was holding me up with a strength suprising in his slight frame. He let me settle down on the

seat Cynara had left. "You have been roughly handled," he said in apology, "Just sit still a minute. My men —" he made a deprecating little gesture, "have had orders. And if I know Karamy's ways, you've been heavily drugged for a long time." His eyes studied me intently. "Better come and have a drink. And — when did you eat last? You look half starved. That's the way of the sharig —"

I rubbed my forehead. "I can't remember," I told him honestly.

"I thought so Come along." Narayan went into the next room, assuming that I would follow and that I knew my way around. After the insanely fornished rooms in Rainbow City, I was a little surprised when the next room proved to be a strictly functional and ordinary kitchen, equipped with the usual items. Out of a relatively un-extraordinary icebox he assembled something that looked rather like the food I was accustomed to from the 20th century, and poured some kind of liquid into an oddly shaped glass. He motioned me into a chair and set the things on the table. "Here, eat this. I know the drugs they give you; you'll have more sense when you've eaten. We've plenty of time to talk, all night if we choose." He saw me glance sidewise at the glass, laughed sketchily, and from the same bottle poured himself a drink and sat down opposite me, sipping it slowly. "Go ahead. I won't poison you till I find out what Karamy's up to."

I laughed apologetically and started eating, with a mental shrug. It had been at least forty-eight hours since I had last tasted food, and I did justice to the plateful before me. Narayan sipped his drink — which, when I tasted mine, appeared to be excellent cognac — and watched me; and when I finally pushed the empty plate aside, he put back his glass and said "Now. Who are you, and what happened?"

I felt better and stronger; more like myself than I'd felt since Rhys had catapulted me into this world. But now that I was on the carpet, I felt I must talk fast and convincingly before those searching grey eyes

"Karamy had me shut in the Tower," I told him, "I was freed today, and we were on our way to the Dreamers Keep. Then your men came along. I didn't know if I was being rescued or captured. I still don't." I stared with purposeful blankness at Narayan; he stared back and I could feel him debating what to do and say. Obviously, an Adric sane and glib and possibly untruthful was a different thing than an Adric too bewildered and shaken to tell anything but the truth. Finally Narayan said "I'm not sure what I ought to do or say, Adric. The bond between us isn't as strong as it was. You know that."

I nodded, perturbed. Adric's thoughts seemed to be surging back, insidiously, as if Narayan held the key to unlock them. What crazy drama was going to be unfolded in my mind now?

Narayan said, low; "Karamy did it, I think."

"Yes." My own voice was as quiet as his own. "Karamy sent me on the Time Ellipse. She knew I'd come back changed — or mad — or not at all. I think — I think she wanted me to betray you again."

"Adric!" Narayan reached out quickly and grabbed my arm, hard, above the elbow, till I cried out with the pain of that steely grip and twisted away, rubbing numbed flesh. "Adric —" Narayan repeated,

unsteadily, "Why do you say — betray me again? Betray me? Adric — it was your hand that freed me! Zandru! Adric —" he begged, "**How much** have you forgotten?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Battle in my Brain

The fire in the other room had burned down to an ember. Without a glance my way, Narayan mended the fire; sat down, his legs stretched toward the little blaze, his shin in his hands; waiting. I could not stand still. I walked, restless, around the room, speaking in little jerks and half-sentences.

"You are the Dreamer," I said, "I — I remember a little. I remember being bound to you. I remember when I — freed you. Not knowing what it might mean, not knowing you could have slain me on the ground of sacrifice."

"No!" Narayan was as motionless as Gamine's veils, but his voice was harsh, strident. "No, Adric, never that! We cannot — kill each other, you and I. I could order you killed, I suppose, but I — I would never do that unless there was no other way. Adric — is there any other way for me, for you?"

A bitterness spoke in my voice; neither side trusted Adric, both wanted his allegiance. I tried to trim my words carefully between the two personalities that were battling for mastery in me.

"It was Karamy," I said, "Who took Adric from you, and sent him, half-mad, back to the Crimson Tower. Karamy's magic stripped him of power, and sent him, gone mad, back to stargazing in Narabedla. But it was not Karamy's —" the voice that was not quite mine shook, suddenly, with my own weariness and the blank terror I'd been keeping at bay, "It wasn't Karamy who sent me here, I'm not Adric. You were perfectly right. I'm no more Adric than — than you are. I'm in Adric's body, yes. He moves me like a puppet! I have his memories, his — some of his thoughts — but he —" my voice cracked suddenly on a note of panic; I knew I sounded like a hysterical kid, but I couldn't stop my own crackup once it had broken loose. "I'm not Adric, I'm not! I don't belong here at all! I don't —"

Narayan jumped up from the bench and I heard his hurrying steps, then his steel hands were hard on my shoulders, swinging me around to face him. "All right," he said, "Steady. It's all right."

I drew a long breath and let it out again. "Thanks," I said briefly, shamed. "I'll be all right now."

Narayan shrugged wearily. "It's all right. I guessed you weren't Adric, of course, from the beginning. But I didn't think Adric, when it came to the test, would really do that to me. I had his promise. I suppose, for him, it was an easy way out. A perfect way of escape." He sank down on the bench again, dropping his head in his hands. After a little, he looked up, and his voice sounded tired. "This is difficult," he said. "My men think you are Adric. I'd never be able to convince them you aren't. Would you mind — pretending? You'll have to; otherwise " he paused, and I saw disquiet in his face. He was not a man who would enjoy threatening, but I could understand his situation. They didn't know me from Adam; I was just an outsider who messed things up by resembling Adric. Well, I was stuck. I hadn't liked the Narabedlans enough to give a hang what Narayan meant to do to them. Narayan, by com-

parison, looked pretty decent. And there was no other way to save my skin. Adric wasn't too popular, it seemed and in Adric's body I hadn't a chance. I laughed. "I'll try," I told him. "But what's this all about?"

Narayan looked up again. "That's right. You wouldn't know. You have some of Adric's memory, I suppose, but not all. You remember who I am?"

"Not entirely —" I told him. I remembered some things. Narayan had been born, some thirty years ago, into a respectable country family who were appalled to discover they had given birth to a mutant Dreamer, and were only too glad to deliver him to the Narabedlans for the enforced stasis. I told Narayan.

"You remember the old Dreamer who served your House?"

I nodded. He had become old, mortal, weak — and had been eliminated. I bowed my head, although I had no personal guilt.

Afterward, Narayan and I had been bound. "I slept in the Dreamer's Keep —" Narayan sounded reflective, almost guilty, "I was wakened, and — given sacrifice I learned to use my power and to give it up to Adric." A brooding horror was in the grey eyes; I realized that Narayan dwelt in his own personal private hell with the memory of what he had done under the spell of Narabedla. "Adric was — strong."

Yes, I thought; Adric had called on Narayan's new power without counting cost. What wonder the memory maddened Narayan? The young Dreamer seemed to win his silent fight for self-control. "Well, you — Adric, I mean — freed me. I found my sister again; Cynara. I was like a child; I had to learn to live, to be alive again. I had been trained to use my power only through the Sacrifice. It had to learn to use it without. It wasn't easy."

"Why?" I asked thoughtlessly. Narayan's eyes froze me. "To use that power." he said in a tense, controlled voice, "Took human life."

Outside the door I could hear the noises of the camp; the light of their watch fires crept in through the cracks. It was too dark to see Narayan's face now, but I heard him moving restlessly about the room. "I have harnessed the power somewhat," he said, "I can use it, myself, a little. Not much. Adric helped me; so did my sister. She had been taken for Sacrifice, but you — Adric — redeemed her. Then — we were able to throw an illusion around Cynara. She is not of Narabedla; but we made it seem as if she had always been there, in Rainbow City. We could do that because Evarin is weak, and because Karamy did not care. It was Rhys who made the Illusion."

"Rhys!" The old Dreamer, the only one born in Narabedla —

"Yes; Gamine is careless with Rhys and lets him wake too long. Rhys and I have been in contact for a long time."

I was hearing scraps of conversation from a vast abyss of time and space, when I had been drawn in electric coma through Karamy's Time Ellipse. **They will know, Narayan will know.** That had been old Rhys. And Adric; **What have I to do with Narayan?** Adric had been—still was — playing a fancy double game with Narayan; I started to open my lips to tell the young Dreamer about it, but he was still talking. "Rhys will not act, not directly, against Rainbow City But he did that much for us, and Gamine and Cynara are friends. We forgot — we all forgot

— that Adric's allegiance belonged to Narabedla first. Until he vanished." I heard the brooding heaviness in Narayan's voice. These men had been friends. Narayan went on "I sent Brennan today, to find out. He didn't come back."

I lowered my head and miserably told him what had happened to Brennan. Narayan's face in a flicker of firelight looked drawn and haggard. "He was a — brave man," Narayan said at last. "But I don't blame you. After the interchange, I think, there was a time when you went on living Adric's life. Thinking his thoughts. But now, I think, he will grow weaker in you. I **hope**. You — who are you, in your own world?"

I shrugged. The words would have meant nothing to Narayan. "My name's Mike Kenscott."

"Mi-ek," Narayan repeated, turning the strange word on his tongue. "The men will call you Adric. I'd better, too. Later —" he shrugged. I didn't say anything; I was still convinced that I hadn't seen the last of Adric But I didn't want to tell Narayan this. I liked the man.

Without warning, Narayan switched on lights. "It's near dawn, and you must be worn out. We've taught them to stay clear of the forests at night, so we're safe enough here. They can't do much till they've been to the Dreamers Keep, in any case." With a sudden boyish friendliness he put out his hand and I took it. "I'm glad you're not Adric. He might be hard to handle now — if he's changed so much."

As if the lights had been a signal, fat Raif came without knocking into the room. Narayan crossed his hostile stare at me. "He's all right, Raif," the Dreamer said. The fat face broke into a sudden, elephantine smile. "I'd better apologize, Adric. I had orders."

"Find him a place to sleep," Narayan suggested, and I followed Raif up a flight of low stairs into an inner room. There was a bed there, clean, but tumbled as if it had had another occupant not long ago. Raif said "Karrel's gone with Cynara. You can sleep here."

I kicked off my boots and crawled between the blankets, suddenly too weary even to answer. I had been two days without sleep, and most of that time I had been under exhausting physical and mental strain. I saw Raif cautiously finger his weapons and sensed that whatever Narayan said, he was reserving judgment. He didn't take chances, this outside lieutenant of Narayan's. Sleepily I said "You can put that up, my friend I'm not going to move till I've had a good. long —"

I didn't even finish the sentence to myself. Instead I went to sleep.

I had slept for hours. I came abruptly out of confused dreams to hear a shrill voice and to feel small hands pulling me upright. Cynara! "Wake up, Adric —" she wailed, "Karamy and Evarin are riding today — hunting **you**!"

I sat up, dizzy-brained, far from alert. "Cynara! How —"

"Oh, never mind that —" her voice was impatient, "What can we **do**?"

I didn't know. I was still stupid with sleep, but I put a reassuring arm around her shoulders. "Don't be afraid," I told her, then, releasing her, bent and began to pull on my boots. I heard the swift pound of steps on the stairs, and Narayan shoved open the door, dragging a brown tunic over his head as he came. He stopped short at the door, staring at his sister. "Cynara, what are you doing here?"

She repeated her news, and he sighed. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all. "Well, never mind," he told her, "The game was almost over, anyhow. Sooner or later they would have broken through the Illusion; Rhys is too old now for that. You were lucky to get away. We'll have to storm the Keep tonight — unless they have too-good hunting." He fumbled with the laces of his shirt A dead weariness was in his grey eyes; they looked flat, almost glazed. He met my questioning stare and smiled ruefully. "The Dreamers stir," he told me, "I am not yet free of — their need. So I must be careful." Cynara shuddered and threw her arms around her brother's neck, clutching him with a fiercely sheltering clasp. "Narayan, no — oh, no — don't—"

But he was already deep in thought again He freed her arms without impatience. "We'll meet that when the time comes, little sister. So Karamy and Evarin ride hunting. Who else Idris?" At her nod, his brows contracted. "All of them — but Gamine," he mused, and turned to me. "Could you conceivably get through to Rhys? I don't dare — not with that — that stirring"

I understood, Narayan was still attuned to the terrible need of the sleeping Dreamers in the Keep. But I reminded him that only Gamine could control old Rhys. He looked at me with a strange curious question in his eyes, but made no comment. My own mind was working strong. I was unsure how I had gotten here in the house of the freed Dreamer. Just what had happened last night? I had thought Narayan would never trust me again; but now, when I needed it most, I seemed to be in his complete confidence. Damn Karamy anyhow, meddling with my memory! And she had the audacity to fly Evarin's devil-birds after me—Adric, lord of the Crimson Tower! She should have a lesson she would not forget — and so should the presumptous Gamine and so should this walking zombie who was staring at me stupidly, as if I were his equal! I said with a slow savagery "I think I can manage Gamine!"

Narayan was watching me anxiously. Gods of the Rainbow, what preposterous things had I said and done last night? I said "We'll take them at the Dreamer's Keep," and saw his face clear.

But what you do not know, Narayan, I added to myself with a secret satisfaction, is that you will join them there!

It never occurred to them to question, to wonder if Adric today were the Adric of last night. We went downstairs and snatched a quick breakfast; Cynara tore off her winged flame-color cloak and stuffed it wrathfully into the fireplace. Her coarse grey dress beneath it made her shy prettiness more striking than ever; Cynara was not Karamy, but she was a pretty thing; and Narayan could hardly fail to trust me when Cynara perched on the arm of my chair and ran her dainty fingers over the bruises on my face. "Your roughs nearly killed him!" she pouted at her brother.

"Oh, I'm not hurt," I smiled at her, making my voice gentle for her ear alone. But I scowled darkly into my plate; pushed the food away and strode out into the camp. Narayan shouted quickly, jumping up, sending his chair crashing to the floor, and he ran after me so that we went down the steps together. "Wait," he commanded in my ear, softly, "Don't forget, to them you're still a traitor!" He took my arm,

and we walked through every row of tents together, Narayan's expression almost belligerent. I saw the faces of the men as they came from their improvised shelter, saw suspicion gradually give way to tolerance and then casual acceptance. Finally Narayan called to Raif. "Stick to him, will you, Raif? He's all right, but the men don't know it yet."

I glanced at Narayan. "Raif," I said tentatively, "Can you find me twelve men who know the way to Rainbow-city and aren't afraid to come close to it?"

"I can," Raif said, and went to do it. I had to hide a smile. Before long I would win back the place my foolishness had lost. The idiot whose body I had shared briefly had almost put it beyond recovery, but in a way he had helped, too. His weakness had won Narayan's confidence. Well, one thing I knew, that futile idiot should not share the coming triumph. Nor should Narayan.

Narayan — fumbling in my pocket, I touched something smooth and hard. Evarin's mirror. Narayan, looking over my shoulder as I dragged it out, asked curiously "What's that?"

I pulled it out with a secret smile. "One of Evarin's toys. Look at it, if you like."

Narayan took it in his hand for a moment, without, however, untwisting the silk. "Go ahead," I urged, "Unwrap it."

I might have sounded too eager. Abruptly Narayan handed it back. "Here. I don't know anything about Evarin."

I had to conceal my disappointment. With a feigned indifference I thrust it back into the pocket. It did not matter. One way or another, Narayan would lose. For Evarin and Karamy rode a-hunting today — and I knew what their game would be!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Falcons of Evarin

I pulled my cloak closer about me, prickling with excitement, as I knelt between Raif and Kerrel in the tree-platform. Just beneath me, Narayan clung to a lower branch. My ears picked up the ring of distant hooves on frozen ground, and I smiled; I knew every nuance of this hunt, and Evarin might find his deadly birds not so obedient to his call today. Not a scrap of me remembered another world where a dazed and bewildered man had flown at a living bird with his pocketknife.

Coldly I found myself considering possibilities. A snare there must be; but who? Narayan himself? No; he was my only protection until I got clear of this riffraff. Besides, if he ever unsheathed his power, unguarded like this, he could drain me as a spider sucks a trapped fly. No; it would have to be Raif. I had a grudge against the fat man, anyway. I pulled at his sleeve. "Wait here for me," I said cunningly, and made as if to leave the platform. Raif walked smiling into the trap. "Here, Adric! Narayan gave orders you weren't to run into any danger!"

Good, good! I didn't even have to order the man to his death; he volunteered. "Well," I protested, "We want a scout out, to carry word when they come." As if we wouldn't know!

"I'll go," Raif said laconically, and leaned past me, touching Narayan's shoulder. He explained in a whisper — we were all whispering, although there was no reason for it — and Narayan nodded. "Good

idea. Don't show yourself."

I held back laughter. **As if that would matter!**

The man swung down into the road I heard his footsteps ring on the rock; heard them diminish, die in distance. Then —

A clamoring, bestial cry ripped the air; a cry that seemed to ring and echo up out of hell, a cry no human throat could compass— but I knew who had screamed That settled the fat man. Narayan jerked around, his blonde face whiter. "Raif!" The word was a prayer.

We half-scrambled, half-leaped into the road. Side by side, we ran down the road together.

The screaming of a bird warned me. I looked up — dodged quickly — over my head a huge scarlet falcon, wide-winged, wheeled and darted in at me. Narayan's yell cut the air and I ducked, flinging a fold of cloak over my head. I ripped a knife from my belt; slashed upward, ducking my head, keeping one arm before my eyes. The bird wavered away, hung in the air, watching me with live green eyes that shifted with my every movement. The falcon's trappings were green, bright against the scarlet wings.

I knew who had flown this bird.

The falcon wheeled, banking like a plane, and rushed in again. No egg had hatched these birds! I knew who had shaped these slapping pinions! Over one corner of my cloak I saw Narayan pull his pistol-like electro-rod, and screamed warning. "Drop it — quick!" The birds could turn gunfire as easily as could Evarin himself, and if the falcon drew one drop of my blood, then I was lost forever, slave to whoever had flown the bird. I thrust upward with the knife, dodging between the bird's wings. Men leaped toward us, knives out and ready. The bird screamed wildly, flew upward a little ways, and hung watching us with those curiously intelligent eyes. Another falcon and another winged across the road, and a thin, uncanny screeing echoed in the icy air. I heard the jingle of little bells. Three birds, golden-trapped and green-trapped and harnessed in royal purple, swung above us; three pairs of unwinking jewel-eyes hung motionless in a row. Beyond them the darkening red sun made a line of blackening trees and silhouetted three figures, a horse, motionless against the background of red sky. Evarin — Idris — and Karamy, intent on the falcon-play, three traitors baiting the one who had escaped their hands.

The falcons poised — swept inward in massed attack. They darted between my knife and Narayan's. Behind me a bestial scream rang out and I knew one of the falcons, at least, had drawn blood — that one of the men behind us was not — ours! Turning and stumbling, the stricken man ran blindly through the clearing, down the road — halfway to those silhouetted figures he reeled, tripping across the body of a man who lay beneath his feet. Narayan gave a gasping, retching sound, and I whirled in time to see him jerk out his electrorod, spasmodically, and fire shot after wild shot at the stumbling figure that had been our man. "Fire —" he panted to me, "Don't let him — he wouldn't want to get to — them —"

I struck the weapon down. "Idiot!" I said savagely, "Some hunting they must have!" Narayan began protesting, and I wrenched the rod from his hand. The man was far beyond firing range now. At Narayan's convulsed face I nearly swore aloud. This weak fool

would ruin everything! I said hastily "Don't waste your fire! We can take care of them later —" I waved a quick hand at the three on the ridge. "There is no help for those caught by Evarin's birds."

Narayan breathed hard, bracing himself in the road. I beckoned the others close. "Don't fire on the birds," I cautioned, tensely; "It only energizes them, they drain the energy from your fire! Use knives; cut their wings — **look out!**" The falcons, like chain-lightning, traced thin orbits down in a slapping confusion of wings and darting beaks. I backed away from the purple-harnessed birds, flicking up my cloak, beating at the flapping wings. Our men, standing in a closed circle back to back, fought them off with knives and with the ends of their cloaks thrown up, swatting them off; and three times I heard the inhuman scream, three times I heard the lurching footsteps as a man — not human any more — broke from us and ran blindly to the distant ridge. I heard Narayan shouting, whirled swiftly to face him — he ran to me, beating back the green-trapped bird that darted in and out on swift agile wings. The screeing of the falcons, the flapping of cloaks, the panting of men hard-pressed, gave the whole scene a nightmare unrealness in which the only real thing was Narayan, fighting at my side. His gasp of inhuman effort made me whirl, by instinct, flinging up my cloak to protect my back, my knife thrust out to cover his throat. He raked a long gash across the down-turned head of the falcon, was rewarded with an unbirdlike scream of agony and the spasmodic open-and-shut of the razor talons. They raked out — clawing. They furrowed a slash in the Dreamer's arm. The razor beak darted in, ready to cut. I threw myself forward, unprotected, off balance, ready to strike.

At the last minute talons and beak turned aside — drew back — darted swiftly, straight at me. And my knife was turned aside, guarding Narayan!

But Narayan jerked aside. His knife fell in the road, and his arm shot out — grabbed the bird behind the head, twisting convulsively so the stabbing needle of a beak could not reach him. The darting head lunged, pecking at the cloak that wrapped his forearm, thrown forward, I stumbled against Narayan, carried by my own momentum, and we fell in a tangle of cloaks and knives and thrashing legs and wings, asprawl in the road. The deadly talons raked my face and his, but Narayan hung on grimly, holding the deadly beak away. I thrust with the knife again and again; thin yellow blood spurted in great gushes, splattering us both with burning venom, I snatched the wounded bird from the Dreamer's weakening hands twisted till I heard the lithe neck snap in my fingers. The bird slumped, whatever had given it life — gone!

And high on the ridge the dwarfed figure of Idris threw up his hands — fell — collapsed across the pommel of his saddle!

Narayan's breath went out limply in a long sigh as we untangled our twisted bodies. Our eyes met as we mopped away the blood. We grinned spontaneously. I liked this man! Almost I wished I need not send him back to tranced dream — what a waste!

He said, quietly "There is a life between us now."

I twisted my face into a smile matching his. "That's only one," I said. "The rest —" I turned, watch-

ing for a moment as the falcons tore at the ring of men. "Come on," Narayan shouted, and we flung ourselves into the breach. I flung down my knife, snatched a sword from someone and swung it in great arcs which seemed somehow right and natural to me. The men scattered before the sword like scared chickens, and I went mad with hate, sweeping the sword in vicious semicircles against the lashing birds ..... the sword cut empty air, and I realized startlingly that both birds lay cut to ribbons at my feet, their blood staining the dead leaves. Narayan's eyes swam, through a red haze, into my field of vision. They were watching me, trouble and fright in their greyness. I forced myself to sanity; dropped the sword atop the dead birds. I wiped my forehead.

"That's that," I said banally.

We took toll of our losses, silently. Narayan, gasping with pain, rubbed a spot of the yellow blood from his face. "That stuff burns!" he grimaced. I laughed tightly; he didn't have to tell me. We'd both have badly festered burns to deal with tomorrow. But now, there was work —

"Look!" One of the men stared and pointed upward, his face tense with fright. Another great bird of prey hung on poised pinions above us, sapphire eyes intent; but as we watched, it wheeled and swiftly winged toward the Rainbow City. Not, however, before I had caught the azure shimmer of the bells and harness. A thin, sweet tinkling came from the flying bells, like a mocking echo of the spell-singer's voice.

Gamine!

CHAPTER NINE

The Return of Adric

Back in the windowless house, we snatched a hurried meal, cared for our slashed cuts, and tried to plan further. The others had not been idle while we fought the falcons. All day Narayan's vaunted army had been accumulating, I could hardly say assembling, in that great bowl of land between Narabedla and the Dreamer's Keep. There were perhaps four thousand men, armed with clumsy powder weapons, with worn swords that looked as if they had been long buried, with pitchforks, scyths, even with rude clubs viciously knobbed. I had been put to it to conceal my contempt for this ragtag and bobtail of an army. And Narayan proposed to storm Rainbow City — with this! I was flabbergasted at the confidence these men had in their young leader. So much the better, I thought, take him from them and they'll scatter to their rat-holes and crofts again! I felt my lips twisting in a bitter smile. They trusted Adric, too. When I had shown myself to them, their shouts had made the very trees echo. Well — again the ironic smile came unbidden, that was just as well, too. When Narayan was re-prisoned, I could use the power of their lost leader to tear down what he himself had built. The thought was exquisitely funny.

"What are you laughing about," Narayan asked. We were lounging on the steps of the house, watching the men thronging around the camp. His slumbrous grey eyes held deep sparks of fire, and without waiting for my answer he went on "Think of it! The curse of the Dreamer's magic lifted — what would it mean to this land, Adric? It means life — hope — for millions of people!"

In a way, Narayan was right. I could remember when I had shared that dream; when it had seemed somehow more worthy than a dream

of personal power. Cynara came down the steps, bent and slipped her soft arms around my shoulder, and I drew her down. A volcano of hate so great I must turn my face away burned up in me. This man was my equal — no. I admitted grudgingly, my superior — and I hated him for it. I hated him because I knew that in his dream of power no one must suffer. I hated him because, once, I had been weak enough to share his feelings.

I said abruptly "Your plans are good, Narayan. There's just one thing wrong with them; they won't work. Storming Rainbow City won't get you anywhere. You could kill Karamy's slaves by the thousands, or the millions, or the billions. But you couldn't kill Karamy, and you'd only leave her free to enslave others. You've got to strike at them when they're in the Dreamer's Keep. When the Dreamers wake is the only moment when they are vulnerable."

"But how can we get to the Dreamer's Keep, Adric? They go guarded a hundred times over, there."

"What's your army for?" I asked him roughly, "To knock down haycocks? Send your men to chase off the guards. I told you I could handle Rhys, if it came to that. He'll get us through to the Dreamer's Keep, if need be."

"What about Gamine?" Cynara asked practically. Gamine was the least of my worries, but I did not tell Cynara that. I listened to their comments and suggestions a little contemptuously. Didn't they know that when the Dreamers woke, the Narabedlans were vulnerable — to the Dreamers alone? If I were there with Narayan, there was no question about who would win.

Cynara scowled at the rip of talons across my face. "You're hurt and you never told me!" she accused. "Come this minute and let me take care of it!" I almost laughed Me — Adric of the Crimson Tower — being ordered around by a little country girl! I snorted, but spoke pleasantly. "I'll live, I expect. Come and sit here with us." I pulled her down at my side, but she leaned her head on her brother's knee, an unquietness in her face. She was a pretty thing, although the cause of all my troubles When I redeemed her from Karamy's slaves, for a whim, I had not known she was Narayan's sister — Zandru's hells, but I had made a ghastly slip! I had told Narayan there was no help for those touched by the birds, when I myself had redeemed his own sister! Had he noticed? Would he attribute it to Karamy's meddling with my mind? I smothered an exclamation, and Cynara and Narayan looked up anxiously. "You are hurt, Adric!"

I shook my head. I fancied Narayan looking at me with suspicion, but I controlled myself. I reached out to draw Cynara to me, but she had drawn back, rising lithely to her feet, like a dove poised for flight; only her hands, small darting hands like candle-flames, remained in mine to pull me lightly to my feet. I tried to hold her, but she protested "There is so much to be done —" and I raised the slim hands to my lips before I let her go. The gesture pleased her, I could see; so much that I watched with contempt as she tripped away. Silly, simple girl! It **would** please her!

In the end it was only Narayan and Cynara who rode with me to Rainbow City Kerrel had taken the army, in sections, to set an ambush for Karamy's guards; we rode in the opposite direction, by a twisting side road. Cynara rode beside

me, her dark eyes glowing. There was dainty witchery in Cynara, and a pretty trust that made me smile and promise recklessly "We will win." It pleased me to think that I could comfort Cynara for her brother's downfall Once conditioned to Rainbow City, she would forget her silly fancies and be a fair and lovely comrade. If she continued to please me, it would be amusing to see this unformed country girl wield the power that had belonged to Karamy the Golden!

It took us an hour of hard riding to reach the lip of the great cup of land, where we paused, looking down the dark, almost-straight avenue of trees that led to the walls of Rainbow City. I whistled tunelessly between my teeth. "Whatever we do, it will be wrong. We'd be taking quite a chance to ride up to the main gate; at the same time, they'll be expecting us to sneak in the back way. They'd never expect us to come by the front avenue."

"The deer walks safest at the hunter's door," Narayan quoted laughing. "But won't they be expecting us to use that kind of logic?"

Cynara giggled, subsided at my frown. "At that rate." I said, "We could go on all night."

Narayan reached overhead, snatching down a crackling sheaf of frost-berries; selected one narrow pod. He held it between finger and thumb. "Chance Two seeds, we go around. Three, we ride straight up the main gate. Agreed?" I nodded, and he crushed the dry husk. One, two — three seeds rolled into my outstretched palm.

"Fate," Narayan said with a shrug. "Ready, then?"

I jounced the seeds in my palm. "One for Evarin, and one for Idris, and one for Karamy," I said contemptuously, and flung the little black balls into the road. "We'll scatter them like that!"

We were lucky; the drive was deserted. If there were guards out for us at all, they had been posted somewhere on the secret paths. Straight toward the towers we rode, under the westering red sun, and just before dusk we checked our horses and tethered them within a mile of the Rainbow City, going forward cautiously on foot.

I objected to this arrangement. "I'll get in alone," I told them, "If anything happens to me, we mustn't lose you as well!"

"I'll stay," said Narayan briefly. "If anything goes wrong, I'll be here to help." Silently I damned the man's loyalty, but there was nothing I could say without spoiling the illusion I had worked so hard to create. I took his hand for a minute. "Thank you." His voice was equally abrupt. "Good luck, Adric." Cynara glanced at me briefly and away again. I walked away from them without looking back.

It was easy enough to find my way into the labyrinthine towers. I was not Lord of the Crimson Tower without knowing its secrets. I climbed the stairs swiftly, ransacked the place. To no avail. When she took my memories, Karamy had also been careful to take everything which could conceivably give me any power over any of the Dreamers, even old Rhys. I went up more stairs till I stood at the very pinnacle of the tower, in Adric's star-room into which I had been catapulted — was it less than three days ago? I stood at the high window, vaguely thinking of an older Adric, an Adric who had watched the stars here, and not alone. I traced back through the years, diving down deep into the seas of sudden memory, and brought up the knowledge of —

"Mike Kenscott!" said a voice behind me, and I whirled to look into the face of a man I had never seen before.

He had the primitive look of a man out of some forgotten past. I had seen such men as I swam in the light of the Time Ellipse. He was tall and clean-shaven; he looked athletic; his eyes were a ridiculous color, dark brown. He had hair He looked angry, if he could be said to have an expression.

But he spoke, clearly and with a deliberate calm. "Well, Mike Kenscott," he said, in a language I had never heard, but found myself understanding perfectly, "You have taken my place very nicely. I suppose I should thank you. You've given me freedom, and Narayan's trust — the rest I can do for myself!" He laughed. "In fact, you're so much me that I'm not much of myself. But I can force you back into your own body —"

The man must be mad! At any rate, he'd insulted the Lord Adric, in his own Tower, and by Zandru's eyelashes, he'd pay for it! I flung myself at him with a yell of rage. My fingers dug into his throat —

And I cried out in the stifling clutch of lean fingers grabbing at me, biting at my neck, my shoulders — an agonizing wrench shuddered over my body —

I faced —

Adric!

CHAPTER TEN

When the Dreamers Wake

Of course I understood, even while I fought, dizzy and reeling, to loose the deathgrip I had put on my own body. I was — back, I was Mike Kenscott again — Adric loosed his hands of his own will, and stepped away, breathing hard. "Thank you," he said in the raw voice that had been mine for so long, "I myself could hardly have done better." With a swift movement he snatched something from a little recess in the wall — pointed — and fired point-blank. A lance of grey mist stabbed out at me —

To my amazement, only a pleasant heat warmed me. I had enough split-second reasoning reflex left to fall in a slumped huddle to the ground. I knew that was what he expected. Adric fumbled in his pockets, took out the little mirror I had taken from Evarin, still wrapped in its protective silk. I watched, breathless, between narrowed eyelids. If he would only open it — but instead he gave a shudder of disgust and flung it straight at me. With a braced, agonizing effort I made myself lie perfectly still, without flinching to avoid the blow. The mirror struck my forehead. I felt blood break to the surface and trickle wetly down my face. I heard Adric moving; heard receding steps and the risp of a closing door. He was gone.

I moved. To this day I am not sure how I escaped death from Adric's weapon, but I think it was because I was in my own body. After I had touched Adric the first time, I was immune to Earth electricity. In this world, I think, I was immune to their force. I wiped the blood from my temple. Good Lord, there was Narayan — waiting with Cynara — I forgot that I had plotted against Narayan, remembering only that I had liked the man. I couldn't let Adric get to them —

I grabbed the mirror, crammed it into a pocket. Against the nightmare haste that drove me I ran to the closet, quickly, from the racks of weapons, chose a short ugly knife. I didn't need swordsman's

training to use that. Thank God, I knew my way around. I could remember everything I'd done when I was Adric — but wait! I could also "remember" what he had done when he was me! That meant Adric could "remember" everything I had done and planned with Narayan! This crazy business of Identity! Even now, could I be sure which of us was who?

I dashed out of the room, ran down the endless stairs three at a time. At the entrance to Gamine's blue tower, a dangerous whirring of wings beat around me; I staggered, almost fell backward. One of the murderous falcons — the one in blue — darted, hanging poised in the stair-well above me. I backed against the wall, hoping the bird would not attack Gamine had not flown falcon with the others.

The strong wings flapped in the closed space; I saw the dart of the vicious little beak. Blindly I struck upward with the knife, shielding my eyes with the other hand, and was rewarded with a splatter of thin burning blood and a scream of unbirdlike agony. I ducked beneath the thrashing wings, and ran on up the stairs; behind me the dying falcon flapped, threshed and rolled down the stairs, a tangle of wings, landing far below with a flailing thump

I was not quite sure what I meant to do. As I climbed, I thought swiftly. Gamine was no friend to Adric, I knew that Adric had known much of Gamine and Rhys, and I drew on that knowledge, but even Adric had not known much of the Spell-singer cloaked in that blurred halo of invisibility. Had he ever seen Gamine?

What was Adric doing now? I had served him well; won him Narayan's trust, then turned him loose again in his own body, to destroy, betray them! I hated Adric as I hope I may never hate again.

And yet, I could not hate him wholly. To know all is to forgive much, and I had lived for three days and nights in Adric's body and brain; knowing his strengths and his weaknesses, his dreams and torments, I could not condemn him utterly. A man may be forgiven much that he does for a woman's bewitchments, and few men could be blamed for allowing Karamy to enslave them Adric had done good, once, too; he had freed the Dreamer, he had loved — but he had trapped me here, and for that, my hate would make him pay — thoroughly!

A shadow flitted across my sight; the robed Gamine barred my way, an air of cold amusement around the poise of the hood and the blurred invisible head. The Spell-singer laughed, mocking. "How like you this body, Adric? You are beaten now, for sure! The stranger works with Narayan — in **your** body, Adric!"

"I'm not Adric," I shouted. "Adric's in his own body again! He's going after Narayan —"

"You expect me to believe that?" Contempt stung me in Gamine's clear, sexless voice.

"Let me to Rhys," I begged, "He'll know I'm telling the truth — damn it, let me by!" Infuriated by the mocking laughter, I thrust my arm to move Gamine forcibly from my path. Whatever Gamine was — man, woman, imp or boy — it was not human. Steel wires writhed between my hands. I struggled impotently in that bone-breaking grip; then with a swift impulse thrust my hand quickly at the blurred invisibility where Gamine's face should have been.

Gamine screamed — a thin cry of horror. Suddenly I knew where I had been those two weeks I lay in the hospital. — when Adric lay, in my body, gone mad, in the hospital in my place. An instinct I had grown to trust warned me to pull away sharply from Gamine's relaxed grip. I shouldered by and ran like hell.

Halfway up the stairs I heard the Spell-singer's feet running behind me, and I quickened my stride and sprinted for the heavy door that barred my way. I could feel Rhys presence behind the door. I threw my weight against the door, twisting the handle frantically.

The door was locked.

Behind me, I heard the padding tread of Gamine. Hopelessly, I put my back to the door, pulling my knife out again, and defied the creature.

Behind me the door suddenly opened and I was flung backward, sprawling, into the room within. "Well, Mike," the old tired voice of Rhys said, "Gamine is a fool, but you are no better. Yes, I knew you were coming. I knew Adric is going, I know where Narayan is and I know what they plan to do. There is only one person who can stop all this, Mike Kenscott. You."

Gaping stupidly, I picked myself up from the floor. The old Dreamer, his wrinkled face serene under the peaked hood, watched me placidly. "What — how —" I stammered.

"Gamine is a prescient. And I am not a complete fool." Rhys smiled wearily. The dreamy look of the very old or the very young was on his face. "I cannot help you; but I will make Gamine help."

The spell-singer came into the room, and I could almost see resentment through that strange halo of nothingless. "Gamine," Rhys said, "It is time. You, and Narayan, must go with him to the Dreamer's Keep."

"No —" Gamine whispered in protest, "Narayan — cannot go! His — his — talisman was destroyed! Only outside the tower — he cannot go in!"

"There is still — mine. Give it to him." At Gamine's cry of dismay, Rhys voice was suddenly a whiplash. "Give it to him, Gamine! I still have power to — compel that! What does it matter what happens to me? I am old; it is Narayan's turn; your turn."

"I'll — keep it for Narayan —" Gamine faltered.

"No!" Rhys spoke sharply. "While you keep it — and I am bound to you — there is still the bondage. Give it to him!"

Gamine sobbed harshly. From the silken veils she drew forth a small jewelled thing; wrapped in insulating silk like Evarin's mirror. She untwisted the silk. It was a tiny sword; not a dagger, but a perfectly modelled sword, a Toy. Evarin's too; but different. I recalled that Evarin had called himself Toy-Maker. Gamine clung to it, the robed shoulders bent.

"Mike must take it." Rhys voice was gentler, "If you keep it, I am still bound to you. If Adric had it, it would bind Narayan again. If Mike keeps it near Narayan — Narayan is free Free to go where he will, even in the Dreamer's Keep. Give it to him, Gamine." Rhys sat down, wearily, as if the effort of speech had tired him past bearing. I stood and listened with a rebellious patience; I was eager to be gone. But my eyes were on the little jewelled Toy in Gamine's hands. It winked blue. It shimmered. It pulsed with a curious heartbeat, hypnotic. Rhys watched, too, his tired face intent and almost eager. "Gamine; if Adric

had seen you, had remembered —"

"I want him to remember!" Gamine's low wail keened weirdly in the silent room. Rhys sighed

"I am Narabedlan," he said at last, "I could not destroy my own people Gamine is not bound — nor you, Mike Kenscott. I suppose I am a traitor; but when I was born Narabedla was a fair city — without so many crimes on its head. Go and warn Narayan, Mike."

Gamine hovered near me, intent, jealous, the shrouded eyes fixed on Rhys. The old man spoke on in a fading voice. "My poor city — now, Gamine. Now. Give it to him and let me rest. Stand away from me, Mike; well away; I do not want the bondage again from you."

I did not understand and stood stupidly still. Gamine gave me an angry push. "Over there, you fool!" I reeled, recovered my balance, stood about six feet from the couch where Rhys half-sat, half-lay. The old man laid one wrinkled hand on the toy sword Gamine held. He took his hand away.

"Now," he said quietly.

Gamine thrust the sword into my hand, and I felt a sudden stinging shock, like electric current, jolt my whole body. I saw Gamine's robed body shiver with the same jolt. The Toy in my hand was suddenly heavy, heavy as if it were made of lead, and the tiny winking in the hilt was darkened. The peaked hood of Rhys drooped until it covered the face.

Gamine caught my arm roughly and the steel of those narrow fingers bit to the bone as they hauled me almost bodily from the room. I heard the echo of a sob in the Spell-singer's whispering croon.

Rhys—Farewell!

The next thing I knew we were racing side by side down flight after flight of stairs. Together we fled through the subterranean passages of Rainbow City. Outside, in the pillared court, a man ran toward us. His brown tunic was ripped and torn; his blond hair was rumpled. A smudge of blood reddened his forehead. I gasped "Narayan!"

The man whirled — saw us — pulled his weapon from his belt. There was no time for explanations. I threw myself at his knees in a flying tackle no football coach would approve, but it did the trick. Narayan went down under me, kicking. Gamine was not one to stand aside in a fight; the robed figure rocketed forward, flung itself on the prone Narayan, holding him motionless with that steely strength. I wrenched the electrorod from Narayan's relaxed fingers. "Listen —" I urged, "I'm not one of Karamy's men — Gamine, let him up!"

"He's got Cynara —" the Dreamer muttered dizzily, "Cynara — who in Zandru's hells are you?" He picked himself up, gazing at me with a stunned, blank look. "My name's Kenscott," I said briefly. Suddenly, feeling it was the best way to establish my good-faith, I pulled out the Toy Gamine had put in my hand. "I've seen Rhys. He sent — this."

Narayan stared at the thing in my hand, a double grief in his young face. "Rhys —" he muttered, "I felt he was — gone!" With bent head, he reached out to take the small thing from me.

In his hand it came alive. The small jewelled Toy seemed suddenly brilliant, flaring, dazzling with a wild burst of faceted light, blue, golden, crimson, flame-color. Gamine's low sweet voice breathed "In the Dreamer's hands!"

"In my hands," Narayan murmured in a choked, almost a tranced

ecstasy. I broke in on their raptures rudely. "Here, Narayan! Is it Adric who's got Cynara?"

He gulped; swallowed hard; thrust the Toy into a pocket and came back to himself, but that light was still in his eyes. He spoke with a hard restraint. "Yes. Adric surprised me — knocked me out. When I came to, they were gone." He blinked once or twice; rubbed his eyes; then, resolutely fumbled for the little Toy and extended it to me. "Here. Keep this till we get to the Dreamer's Keep."

I took it without comment. Gamine slipped away; came back, leading horses. "I couldn't find a single guard," the cold voice murmured, "I wonder where they are?"

"Adric knows," said Narayan, tight-lipped.

We mounted.

The wind was rising. Above us the moons swung slowly in an indigo sky. Sparks flew from our hooves against the frosty stones. We were racing against time, and a nightmare panic had me while I gripped the saddle of my racing horse. It took all my concentration to stick on the animal's back, but I was acquiring balance and a feel for riding. The ill wind was blowing some good, I thought inanely. Narayan's blonde hair was frosty pale in the moonlight, and the eerie Gamine was a nightmare ghost, a phantom from nowhere. Far away we heard the spatter of gunfire, the screams of dying men, the ring of swords and spears. Thinly Gamine chanted in the night. Narayan's face looked haunted. "There are the guards — attacking —" he jerked out over the hoof-noises.

The scream of falcons rang swiftly above Gamine's chant. The too-familiar beat of wings slapped around my head, and I flung up my arm to knock away one serpentine neck. My terrified horse plunged and I rocked in the saddle nearly falling. Another bird swooped down on Narayan — another — then there were swarms of them, gold and purple and green, crimson, blue, flame-color. The air was thick with their wings. Gamine screamed; I saw Narayan beat the air with his cloak. The veiled Spell-singer, crouched in the saddle, was lashing at them with the whip from her saddle. The lash kept the falcons at bay, but the razor talons caught at the blue shroudings. Narayan, whip in one hand, sword in the other, beat round him in great arcs, and I heard one bird's death-cry sending ringing echoes to the sky. I flung round me with my knife —

"The mirror —" screamed Gamine, "Evarin's mirror! Quick, they-'re coming by millions!"

They were coming in scores — hundreds, whirling and screeing. These were not the soul-falcons, belled and elaborately endowed with the intelligence and cunning of their launcher. These were — machines. Alive, yes, but not a life we knew. Only the nightmare freak of a science gone mad could produce — or control — these hateful things that were filling the clean air, groping for us with needle beaks and talons and wild wings. Only Evarin —

I fumbled blindly for the mirror, clumsily stripping the silks. A needle-talon raked at my wrist, and by sheerest instinct I struck upward, turning the face of the mirror toward the bird.

The bird reeled in mid-air — flapped — fell. A tingling shock rattled through my arm. I dropped the mirror — leaped to catch it. The thing was a perfect conductor. It — drained energy. I knew now why

Evarin had been so anxious to have me — or Adric — look into its depths. It could have touched the energy waves of my brain through my eyes. The birds were brainless; all energy. I grabbed the mirror and held it upright; I caught a half-glimpse, from the tail of my eye, of the weird lightnings coiled inside it, but even that glimpse coiled my stomach in nervous knots. Shielding my face, I held it upward. The birds flew toward it like a moth to the candle. Shock after shock flowed along my arm. Three more of the horrible falcons fell limp, lifeless — drained.

A strange exhilaration began to buoy me up. The force from the birds was not electricity but a kindred force, which my nerves drank greedily. I thrust the mirror out; was rewarded again by the surge of power, and again the birds, this time by dozens, flapped and fell.

Then, as if whatever had loosed the army of falcons had realized their uselessness, the whole remaining force of the birds wheeled and fled, winging swiftly over the land to the distant donjon that rose high and far into the black midnight.

Recalled — to the Dreamer's Keep!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Last Sacrifice

The flow of strength had renewed me; I felt that I could face whatever came. I thrust Evarin's mirror into my pocket; flung a word to Narayan and we were riding again, Gamine racing behind us The blue shroudings had been torn to ribbons by the snappings of falcon-claws; I could see the pallid gleam of naked flesh through the torn veils. The noise of battle behind us grew more distinct; I could make out the explosions and the distant flashes of colored flame. I shuddered; even now that frightful army of falcons might be winging to join Adric and Evarin. The rebels could kill some of them, but for every falcon dead there would be twenty more slaves for Narabedla! What could Narayan's men with their scythes and pitchforks and rude rusty guns do against the incredible science of a Toymaker? Narayan's strained face was ghastly in the moonlight; I needed no telepathy to read his thoughts. Slaughter for his men — what for his sister? Our horses seemed to lag, to drag through a mire of motionless, yet they were at the full gallop of their endurance. The sound of fighting grew closer. Everything in me cried out that I was an utter fool, riding full tilt into a battle in which I had no stake. Yet something else told me, coldly and with a grim truth, that all I possessed was what I might win today, for this was the only world I would ever know; that I would never see my own world again.

Never! And Adric should rot in a hell of his own choosing for that!

The sounds of fighting seemed very close. Narayan pulled up his horse so quickly that it nearly sent Gamine plunging into his back. He said in a low, concentrated voice "Adric isn't at the battle! This way — quick!" He whirled the horse and dashed down a side road at right angles to the way we had been riding If we had raced before, now our horses seemed to fly. The battle raged behind us; I heard dim screams, the neighing of wounded horses, the muffled sound of earth flying upward, exploded in fire. But it had a dreamy unreal quality,

like noises through a nightmare. We had left the forest and were riding across a dark and hummocky plain. Moss padded our hoof-noises; now and then some small furry thing skittered across the track we were following and twice my horse shied at swooping birds and my heart stopped until I saw they were not the falcons of Evarin.

Stark and black against a treeless horizon I could see the Deamer's Keep, between the small crescents of the two lesser moons. The largest one rode a golden orbit over my head. I rode hunched in the saddle, my eyes on the vast cairn only a few miles away.

Suddenly a vast arch of lightning spanned the sky above the Dreamer's keep. Blue lightning. I heard Narayan groan like a man in his death-agony. Twisting in my saddle, I saw brooding horror on his face — mingled with pain — and a terrified satisfaction. "The sacrifice — I still — feel it," he breathed in labored gasps, "I still — take from it — Mike! Mike —" His voice held unbearable torture, and the veins in the fair face stood out, black and congested with effort, "If I start to work for — them — promise — promise to shoot me —"

"Oh God —" I gasped.

"Mike, promise! Gamine!"

Gamine spurred the horse to his side; I heard the low voice, sweet, almost crooning. Again the vast arch of blueness spanned the sky. Narayan dug spurs savagely into the side of his horse and raced ahead of us. On the plain, limned starkly against the sky, a horseman appeared. He rode low in the saddle, his horse carrying a double burden, but racing fleetly — to the Keep of the Dreamers. I cursed — I knew that lean crouched figure, knew it as well as my own! Adric rode to the sacrifice — and before him, limp across his saddle, he bore Cynara!

The rest of that nightmare ride is a blank in my mind. The next thing I remember clearly is reining up beneath the lee of the gaunt pile of rocks-on-rocks that was the Dreamer's Keep. There was no sign of Adric or Cynara, no sign of any living person, nothing but the incandescent blue lightning that rayed out now every four seconds or so; Narayan's face was a white death-mask, and Gamine's breathing came in short sobbing pants. I alone was free from the effect. My body throbbed and tingled with the weird energy set free in the night. We flung ourselves from our horses. Gamine tugged futilely at the torn veilings to conceal her face, and for the first time the blurred invisibility wavered and I caught a glimpse of one blue eye, blue as the sky lightnings that rose and flared and died.

The lee of the tower dwarfed us with its massive bulk. Gamine clutched my arm, the cruel fingers digging bruisingly into my flesh. "Listen!"

I strained my ears. All I could hear was a low, not unpleasant humming, like the singing drone of great bees or high-tension wires; but the sound struck both aliens with horror. Narayan opened his lips —

I dug frantically in my other pocket; brought out the Toy Rhys had given me. At sight of it Narayan's haggard face relaxed a little. He caught it from me with quick hands. "Free of Adric —" he breathed with that swift erasure of tension I had seen before. He drew a long, moaning sigh. He closed his eyes for a moment.

Somewhere above us a scream

rang out; a cry bestial in its mad appeal. It broke the static immobility that held us, and Narayan, sliding the Toy inside his shirt, turned and began to run around the Tower, Gamine and I panting at his heels.

We came around the corner beneath an arching outcrop of stonework. No one needed to give orders; as one, we scrambled up on the ledge, crowding close together.

I gripped my hand on the knife in my belt. It had a comforting feel. I needed that.

A framed archway let us look down into the inside of the Keep. Below us a voice cried out despairingly — unbelievingly. "Adric —" we heard Cynara cry out. "Adric, no — oh, no —" Under our combined weight the glass shattered; we hurled inward. We found ourselves standing on a great shelf, about ten feet above the interior floor of the Keep, looking down at a scene framed in stark horror. Golden Karamy, dwarfed Idris, Evarin — stood in a close circle about a ring of coffins which gleamed crystal — glowed with scintillant radiance. In the hand of each of them was a tiny, jewelled, faceted Toy, and in the coffins —

Gamine screamed.

"The Dreamers —"

Not till then did we see Adric and what he was doing. In the center of the ring of coffins a dais rose upright, horribly altar-like, and a line of the mindless slaves, nude, vacant-eyed, defiled before the altar. As each slave stepped forward there was a shuddering moan from the others, the tiny swords rose and fell and in a brilliant flame of blue light, the slave — was not! And Adric — Cynara struggling between his hands — was thrusting her forward, into the space between the coffins, toward the nexus of the blue light — toward the Sacrifice-stone of the Dreamers!

The sight put us beyond caution. We threw ourselves from the ledge — and went down into a writhing, sprawling mass of living flesh. A barked command from Idris, and the slaves swarmed on us, drowning us in smothering bodies. I kicked and sprawled and thrashed and scratched and bit my way to the top of the heap and somehow for a second, I rolled free. That instant was enough. I was on my feet, the knife in my hand. Dragging bodies clung at my heels; I kicked out savagely, felt my boot strike naked flesh, felt and heard the pulpy sound of a skull crushing under the impact of my heel. The sound rocked my stomach, but I was not in a position to be fastidious. My eyes were swimming in trickling blood. Gamine clawed and thrust free and together we elbowed out of the press.

Evarin sprang at me. I thrust blindly with the knife in my hand, ripped into his shoulder, missing the throat by inches. I caught the Toy from his hand as it fell free. A moment of the clinging, tearing melee — then we three — Gamine and Narayan and I were standing back to back in the centre of the ring of coffins. There was a long howl of pain and terror from Evarin and the four Narabedlans flung themselves backward in a panic terror. For within the coffins the Dreamers were waking!

But Adric was no coward. He threw himself quickly forward — caught at Cynara again, and with all the force in his lean arms he flung her — straight toward the nexus of blue light! Narayan and

Gamine stood frozen, bound by the Toys in their hands against the light, but I broke free — I passed straight across the cone of blue lightning —

Unharmed! The blasting energy tingled pleasantly in my body as I caught Cynara in mid-air and reeled away from the force that would have meant annihilation for her. Narayan broke away from the paralysis momentarily and caught Cynara's staggering body from my arms. Then I felt the impact as Adric's tall, heavy body crashed against me, felt the shock as my fist smashed against his jaw and heard him grunt as we locked into a clinch that carried us nearer — and nearer to that center of blue energy. A moment we swayed there, at the very edge of the lightning — then Evarin's tensed cat-body lit in the centre of my back —

Again the heat thrust needles through me. Adric was flung clear, but there was an arch of blue that spanned the vault, a wild scream like the death-cry of a panther, and the Toy-maker was —

Gone!

Within the coffins the blue lights wakened, as if the last flare of energy had freed them. Quickly Idris and Karamy ran forward, quickly Adric leaped to join them, thrusting the Talisman Toys against the very lids of the coffins — but too late. The Toys in the hands of Narayan and Gamine spat glaring blue fire, and step by step the Narabedlans retreated; farther, farther, farther —

The coffins were suddenly empty. As if by magic, three old men and a woman of surpassing beauty materialized about Narayan and Gamine. In their faces I could distinguish a curious likeness to Narayan and to old Rhys — and Narayan, within the circle of the Dreamers, reached out and flung the tattered veils from Gamine. A triumphant chant rushed sweetly from the lips of the Spell-singer as the veils came away and in the center of the mutants stood Gamine the Dreamer, dwarfing them all by a pure majesty; the majesty of a Dreamer who had never slept! A woman she was, slender and fair and very beautiful and as like to Narayan as a twin sister, and I thought of Isis and the young Osiris as the blue eyes blazed out and the lovely body arched upward in tall freedom from the shrouding veils. Blue lightning swirled and faded and the Dreamer's tower was bathed in trembling iridescent rainbows. Karamy and Idris retreated step by step, slinking back into the shadows. Only Adric stood his ground.

The Rainbows died. The air was void and empty of energy. The Dreamers stood looking on the crouching Karamy with her hidden face, on the bent, gnarled dwarf, on Cynara, kneeling white and radiant, on Adric, who stood with his lips parted, staring at Gamine like a man released from a spell. It was Gamine who spoke, her eyes resting on Karamy.

"She has done much evil."

The others clamored, but Gamine shook her head, long pale hair lifting electrically around her face. "No," she disclaimed softly, "Why should they die? They are only an old dwarf — a silly fool who could not make up his own mind —" her eyes dwelt disquietingly on Adric, "And Karamy. They have no power, now we are freed. Pity them — now we are freed."

Adric, slowly, drew himself upright. His slackly-parted lips set

firmly and he looked at Narayan with a dispassionate, stubborn shrug. "Kill me, if you like."

"No, Gamine." Narayan stepped toward the man in crimson, "Adric," he said in a strange, half-choked excitement,, "I want to see what you saw before — to see what sent you away — to see the thing that drove you mad. Gamine's veils — Gamine, let him see! Show him, Gamine! Show him what he saw then!"

Gamine came forward slowly to where Karamy knelt. "Stand up!"

Slowly Karamy rose to her feet. There was no hope in her eyes; no mercy in Gamine's. The two pairs of eyes, cat-yellow and blue, fought for a moment; it was Karamy's that fell. The Dreamer woman smiled faintly. "My brothers and my sisters," she said at last, "Karamy is beautiful, is she not?"

I suppose no woman on earth has ever been or ever will be as beautiful as Karamy the Golden. She stood proudly, turning to Adric, and I saw longing and love break forth in the man's eyes. He gazed and gazed, and Karamy laughed and held out her arms, and Adric, bemused, went toward her —

"Hold him," commanded Narayan tersely.

One of the Dreamers made a curious sign with his left hand and Adric was arrested; stood gripped in a vise of invisible force.

"See?" Gamine said in a ringing voice, "But now see Karamy — shorn of the Illusion her Dreamer threw! See the form of Karamy that she made me wear! **This!**" She reached out and touched Karamy with the little Talisman she held.

There was a gasp of horror from many throats. Karamy — Karamy the golden — there are no words for the change that took place before our eyes. I was sick and retching with horror before the metamorphosis was half complete, and turned away my eyes; Cynara was sobbing softly into her skirt; but Adric, frozen, could not look away.

Gamine's laugh — low and sweet and doubly deadly for its sweetness — reached my ears. "Shall I lend you my veils — sister?" She murmured, mocking, and again the horrible laugh. "NO? Go **forth!**" Her voice was a lashing whip, and with a broken wail, the thing that had been Karamy threw up an arm across the staring sockets and fled away into the night. And we never saw it again.

So that was the end of Karamy the Golden — the end —

A little later I found that Adric and I were staring stupidly at one another, puzzled, but without animosity. Cynara came and slipped an arm round Adric, and I turned away, embarrassed, for the man was sobbing like a child. I was amazed and sick with the enormity of all that I had seen and done. I stood and shivered and shook with deadly chill. I suppose it was reaction.

"Steady!" Narayan's steely hand on my shoulder kept me once again from making an ass of myself. "You've done us a big favor," he said after a few minutes. "I wish I had some adequate way of thanking you — not for myself — for millions of people. Perhaps one day we'll find a way of sending you back to your own world, but —" his shoulders moved negatively, "I can't say —"

Adric's lean non-human face peered over Narayan's shoulder. He looked subdued, and spoke with a curious humility. He sounded sane. "There will be a way, some day. It will take time to find it, now, but —

there will be."

Spontaneously we grinned at each other. I could not hate this man. I knew him too well. I knew, suddenly, that we would be friends. Which, indeed, is what happened.

Narayan looked from one to the other of us, troubled, then Gamine's intent face was at his elbow.

"I'll see to these men," she said quietly. "Narayan, they need you, and it's your responsibility. They have to be told why they were wakened, and how; there are slaves to be freed, armies —"

Narayan glanced guiltily over his shoulder at the other Dreamers who stood huddled together in a bewildered little knot. "That's so," he acknowledged gravely, and went to his people. I watched him, feeling as if my one friend here had deserted me; but it had to be that way. Narayan was not our kind. He was the sort of man who could remodel a world; but the look he sent us over his shoulder told Adric and I that we should, if we liked, have a share in that work.

"Now Mike Kenscott," said Gamine, "I want to talk to you."

We left Adric and Cynara in that place, and I cast a wistful glance back at them. Cynara was lovely, and very human, and I suppose I had hoped that in some way she would compensate for my enforced stay in this world. But there was Adric —

Gamine and I stood on the steps of the Dreamer's Keep, and her voice, soft and wistful, mourned in the grey dawn. "No one ever knew I had the Dreamer powers — except old Rhys. Rhys and I were bound together — he knew, and kept me close to him, hid me and helped me. One day Adric found out. It — changed Adric. He — we freed Narayan together. Then Karamy made me what I was — what you saw. It hurt Adric — hurt something in him. I could have cured him, in time, but Karamy had him bewitched. She stripped him of power, of memory. I do not know, but perhaps some day, Adric may remember that I was — I was —"

"Gamine! Gamine!" Adric's voice cried from within, and the next moment he rushed forth — caught the Dreamer woman in his arms, and his mouth met hers and she stood swaying in his arms, laughing and crying together. Cynara, following slowly, smiled with gentle satisfaction. I said, stunned, "What —"

Over Adric's shoulder Gamine's blue eyes met mine in liquid satisfaction and she finished her interrupted sentence. "I was Adric's wife," she said, gently.

Cynara's voice was tenderly humorous as we left them together in the glory of the rising sun. "Poor Gamine," she said, "and poor Adric, too. I was sorry for them both. But I wish these men would make up their minds!"

I had an idea.

"Adric's made up his mind," I said, turning my head a little toward the couple who stood, clasped, as if they could never let go. "I suppose —" I came a little closer to Cynara, who stood looking up at me with wide, innocent eyes and lips ingenuously parted, "I suppose that gives me the right to make up my mind. Doesn't it?"

She smiled. "Does it?" But her bright eyes had given me my answer, and I never had to make up my mind again.

Sorry: No room for "Scientifilm Searchlight"; Letters, Back next month.

The SERPENT RIVER

By Don Wilcox

The Code was rigid—no fraternization with the peoples of other planets! Earth wanted no "shotgun weddings" of the worlds of space!

"Split" Campbell and I brought our ship down to a quiet landing on the summit of a mile-wide naked rock, and I turned to the telescope for a closer view of the strange thing we had come to see.

It shone, eighteen or twenty miles away, in the light of the late afternoon sun. It was a long silvery serpent-like **something** that crawled slowly over the planet's surface.

There was no way of guessing how large it was, at this distance. It might have been a rope rolled into shape out of a mountain — or a chain of mountains. It might have been a river of bluish-gray dough that had shaped itself into a great cable. Its diameter? If it had been a hollow tube, cities could have flowed through it upright without bending their skyscrapers. It was, to the eye, an endless rope of cloud oozing along the surface of the land. No, not cloud, for it had the compactness of solid substance.

We could see it at several points among the low foothills. Even from this distance we could guess that it had been moving along its course for centuries. Moving like a sluggish snake. It followed a deep-worn path between the nearer hills and the high jagged mountains on the horizon.

What was it?

"Split" Campbell and I had been sent here to learn the answers. Our sponsor was the well known "EGGWE" (the Earth-Galaxy Good Will Expeditions.) We were under the EGGWE Code. We were the first expedition to this planet, but we had come equipped with two important pieces of advance information. The Keynes-Roy roving cameras (unmanned) had brought back to the Earth choice items of fact about various parts of the universe. From these photos we knew (1) that man lived on this planet, a humanoid closely resembling the humans of the Earth; and (2) that a vast cylindrical "rope" crawled the surface of this land, continuously, endlessly.

We had intentionally landed at what we guessed would be a safe distance from the rope. If it were a living thing, like a serpent, we preferred not to disturb it. If it gave off heat or poisonous gases or deadly vibrations, we meant to keep our distance. If, on the other hand, it proved to be some sort of vegetable — a vine of glacier proportions — or a river of some silvery, creamy substance — we would move in upon it gradually, gathering facts as we progressed. I could depend upon "Split" to record all observable phenomena with the accuracy of split-hairs.

Split was working at the reports like a drudge at this very moment.

I looked up from the telescope, expecting him to be waiting his turn eagerly. I misguessed. He didn't even glance up from his books. Rare young Campbell! Always a man of duty, never a man of impulse!

"Here Campbell, take a look at the 'rope'."

"Before I finish the reports, sir? If I recall our Code, Section Two, Order of Duties upon Landing: A —"

"Forget the Code. Take a look at the rope while the sun's on it. . .See it?"

"Yes sir."

"Can you see it's moving? See the little clouds of dust coming up from under its belly?"

"Yes sir. An excellent view, Captain Linden."

"What do you think of it, Split? Ever see a sight like that before?"

"No sir."

"Well, what about it? Any comments?"

Split answered me with an enthusiastic, "By gollies, sir!" Then, with restraint, "It's precisely what I expected from the photographs, sir. Any orders, sir?"

"Relax, Split! That's the order. Relax!"

"Thanks — thanks, Cap!" That was his effort to sound informal, though coming from him it was strained. His training had given him an exaggerated notion of the importance of dignity and discipline.

He was naturally so conscientious it was painful. And to top it all, his scientific habit of thought made him want to stop and weigh his words even when speaking of casual things such as how much sugar he required in his coffee.

Needless to say, I had kidded him unmercifully over these traits. Across the millions of miles of space that we had recently traveled (our first voyage together) I had amused myself at his expense. I had sworn that he would find, in time, that he couldn't even trim his fingernails without calipers, or comb his hair without actually physically splitting the hairs that cropped up in the middle of the part. That was when I had nicknamed him "Split" —and the wide ears that stuck out from his stubble-cut blond hair had glowed with the pink of selfconsciousness. Plainly, he liked the kidding. But if I thought I could rescue him from the weight of dignity and duty, I was mistaken.

Now he had turned the telescope for a view far to the right. He paused.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"I cannot say definitely. The exact scientific classification of the object I am observing would call for more detailed scrutiny —"

"You're seeing some sort of object?"

"Yes sir."

"What sort of object?"

"A living creature, sir — upright, wearing clothes —"

"A man?"

"To all appearances, sir —"

"You bounder, give me that telescope!"

2.

If you have explored the weird life of many a planet, as I have, you can appreciate the deep sense of excitement that comes over me when, looking out at a new world for the first time, I see a man-like animal.

Walking upright!

Wearing adornments in the nature of clothing!

I gazed, and my lungs filled with the breath of wonderment. A man! Across millions of miles of space — a man, like the men of the Earth.

Six times before in my life of exploration I had gazed at new realms within the approachable parts of our universe, but never before had the living creatures borne such wonderful resemblance to the

human life of our Earth.

A man!

He might have been creeping on all fours.

He might have been skulking like a lesser animal.

He might have been entirely naked.

He was none of these—and at the very first moment of viewing him I felt a kinship toward him. Oh, he was primitive in appearance — but had my ancestors not been the same? Was this not a mirror of my own race a million years or so ago? I sensed that my own stream of life had somehow crossed with his in ages gone by. How? Who can ever know? By what faded charts of the movements through the sky will man ever be able to retrace relationships of forms of life among planets?

"Get ready to go out and meet him, Campbell," I said. "He's a friend."

Split Campbell gave me a look as if to say, Sir, you don't even know what sort of animal he is, actually, much less whether he's friendly or murderous.

"There are some things I can sense on first sight, Campbell. Take my word for it, he's a friend."

"I didn't say anything, sir."

"Good. Don't. Just get ready."

"We're going to go out —?"

"Yes," I said. "Orders."

"And meet both of them?" Split was at the telescope.

"Both?" I took the instrument from him. Both! "Well!"

"They seem to be coming out of the ground," Split said. "I see no signs of habitation, but apparently we've landed on top of an underground city — though I hasten to add that this is only an hypothesis."

"One's a male and the other's a female," I said.

"Another hypothesis," said Split.

The late evening sunshine gave us a clear view of our two "friends." They were fully a mile away. Split was certain they had not seen our ship, and to this conclusion I was in agreement. They had apparently come up out of the barren rock hillside to view the sunset. I studied them through the telescope while Split checked over equipment for a hike.

The man's walk was unhurried. He moved thoughtfully, one might guess. His bare chest and legs showed him to be statuesque in mold, cleanly muscled, fine of bone. His skin was almost the color of the cream-colored robe which flowed from his back, whipping lightly in the breeze. He wore a brilliant red sash about his middle, and this was matched by a red headdress that came down over his shoulders as a circular mantle.

The girl stood several yards distant, watching him. This was some sort of ritual, no doubt. He was not concerned with her, but with the setting sun. Its rays were almost horizontal, knifing through a break in the distant mountain skyline. He went through some routine motions, his moving arms highlighted by the lemon-colored light of evening.

The girl approached him. Two other persons appeared from somewhere back of her . . . Three . . . Four . . . Five . . .

"Where do they come from?" Split had paused in the act of checking equipment to take his turn at the telescope. If he had not done so, I might not have made a discovery. The landscape was **moving.**

The long shadows that I had not noticed through the telescope were a

prominent part of the picture I saw through the ship's window when I looked out across the scene with the naked eye. The shadows were moving.

They were tree shadows. They were moving toward the clearing where the crowd gathered. And the reason for their movement was that the trees themselves were moving.

"Notice anything?" I asked Split.

"The crowd is growing. We've certainly landed on top of a city." He gazed. "They're coming from underground."

Looking through the telescope, obviously he didn't catch the view of the moving trees.

"Notice anything else unusual?" I persisted.

"Yes. The females — I'm speaking hypothetically — but they **must** be females — are all wearing puffy white fur ornaments around their elbows. I wonder why?"

"You haven't noticed the trees?"

"The females are quite attractive," said Split.

I forgot about the moving trees, then, and took over the telescope. Mobile trees were not new to me I had seen similar vegetation on other planets — "sponge trees" — which possessed a sort of muscular quality. If these were similar, they were no doubt feeding along the surface of the slope below the rocky plateau. The people in the clearing beyond paid no attention to them.

I studied the crowd of people. Only the leader wore the brilliant garb. The others were more scantily clothed. All were handsome of build. The lemon-tinted sunlight glanced off the muscular shoulders of the males and the soft curves of the females.

"Those furry elbow ornaments on the females," I said to Split, "they're for protection. The caves they live in must be narrow, so they pad their elbows."

"Why don't they pad their shoulders? They don't have anything on their shoulders."

"Are you complaining?"

We became fascinated in watching, from the seclusion of our ship. If we were to walk out, or make any sounds, we might have interrupted their meeting. Here they were in their native ritual of sunset, not knowing that people from another world watched. The tall leader must be making a speech. They sat around him in little huddles. He moved his arms in calm, graceful gestures.

"They'd better break it up!" Split said suddenly. "The jungles are moving in on them."

"They're spellbound," I said. "They're used to spongetrees. Didn't you ever see moving trees?"

Split said sharply. "Those trees are marching! They're an army under cover. Look!"

I saw, then. The whole line of advancing vegetation was camouflage for a sneak attack. And all those natives sitting around in meeting were as innocent as a flock of sitting ducks. Split Campbell's voice was edged with alarm. "Captain! Those worshippers — how can we warn them? Oh-oh! Too late. Look!"

All at once the advancing sponge trees were tossed back over the heads of the savage band concealed within. They were warriors — fifty or more of them — with painted naked bodies. They dashed forward in a wide semicircle, swinging crude weapons, bent on slaughter.

3.

They were waving short clubs or whips with stones tied to the ends.

They charged up the slope, about sixty yards, swinging their weird clubs with a threat of death.

Wild disorder suddenly struck the audience. Campbell and I believed we were about to witness a massacre.

"Captain — **Jim**! You're not going to let this happen!"

Our sympathies had gone to the first groups, the peaceable ones. I had the same impulse as Campbell — to do something — anything! Yet here we sat in our ship, more than half a mile from our thirty-five or forty "friends" in danger.

Our friends were panicked. But they didn't take flight. They didn't duck for the holes in the rocky hilltop. Instead, they rallied and packed themselves around their tall leader. They stood, a defiant wall.

"Can we shoot a ray, Jim?"

I didn't answer. Later I would recall that Split could drop his dignity under excitement — his "Captain Linden" and "sir." Just now he wanted any sort of splitsecond order.

We saw the naked warriors run out in a wide circle They spun and weaved, they twirled their deadly clubs, they danced grotesquely. They were closing in. Closer and closer. It was all their party.

"Jim, can we shoot?"

"Hit number sixteen, Campbell."

Split touched the number sixteen signal.

The ship's siren wailed out over the land.

You could tell when the sound struck them. The circle of savage ones suddenly fell apart. The dancing broke into the wildest contortions you ever saw. As if they'd been spanked by a wave of electricity. The siren scream must have sounded like an animal cry from an unknown world. The attackers ran for the sponge trees. The rootless jungle came to life. It jerked and jumped spasmodically down the slope. And our siren kept right on singing.

"Ready for that hike, Campbell? Give me my equipment coat." I got into it. I looked back to the telescope. The tall man of the party had behaved with exceptional calmness. He had turned to stare in our direction from the instant the siren sounded. He could no doubt make out the lines of our silvery ship in the shadows. Slowly, deliberately, he marched over the hilltop toward us.

Most of his party now scampered back to the safety of their hiding places in the ground. But a few — the brave ones, perhaps, or the officials of his group — came with him.

"He needs a stronger guard than that," Campbell grumbled.

Sixteen was still wailing. "Set it for ten minutes and come on," I said. Together we descended from the ship.

We took into our nostrils the tangy air, breathing fiercely, at first. We slogged along over the rock surface feeling our weight to be one-and-a-third times normal. We glanced down the slope apprehensively. We didn't want any footraces. The trees, however, were still retreating. Our siren would sing on for another eight minutes. And in case of further danger, we were equipped with the standard pocket arsenal of special purpose capsule bombs.

Soon we came face to face with the tall, stately old leader in the cream-and-red cloak.

Split and I stood together, close enough to exchange comments against the siren's wail. Fine looking people, we observed. Smooth faces. Like the features of Earth men. These creatures could walk down any main street back home. With a

bit of makeup they would pass. "Notice, Captain, they have strange looking eyes." "Very smooth." "It's because they have no eyebrows. . . no eye lashes." "Very smooth — handsome — attractive."

Then the siren went off.

The leader stood before me, apparently unafraid He seemed to be waiting for me to explain my presence. His group of twelve gathered in close.

I had met such situations with ease before. "EGGWE" explorers come equipped. I held out a gift toward the leader. It was a singing medallion attached to a chain. It was discshaped, patterned after a large silver coin. It made music at the touch of a button. In clear, dainty bell tones it rang out its one tune, "Trail of Stars."

As it played I held it up for inspection. I placed it around my own neck, then offered it to the leader. I thought he was smiling. He was not overwhelmed by the "magic" of this gadget. He saw it for what it was, a token of friendship. There was a keenness about him that I liked. Yes, he was smiling. He bent his head forward and allowed me to place the gift around his neck

"Tomboldo," he said, pointing to himself.

Split and I tried to imitate his breathy accents as we repeated aloud, "Tomboldo."

We pointed to ourselves, in turn, and spoke our own names. And then, as the names of the others were pronounced, we tried to memorize each breathy sound that was uttered. I was able to remember four or five of them. One was Gravgak.

Gravgak's piercing eyes caused me to notice him. Suspicious eyes? I did not know these people's expressions well enough to be sure.

Gravgak was a guard, tall and muscular, whose arms and legs were painted with green and black diamond designs.

By motions and words we didn't understand, we inferred that we were invited to accompany the party back home, inside the hill, where we would be safe. I nodded to Campbell, "It's our chance to be guests of Tomboldo." Nothing could have pleased us more. For our big purpose —to understand the Serpent River— would be forwarded greatly if we could learn, through the people, what its meanings were. To analyze the river's substance, estimate its rate, its weight, its temperature, and to map its course — these facts were only a part of the information we sought. The fuller story would be to learn how the inhabitants of this planet regarded it: whether they loved or shunned it, and what legends they may have woven around it. All this knowledge would be useful when future expeditions of men from the Earth followed us (through EGGWE) for an extension of peaceful trade relationships.

Tomboldo depended upon the guard Gravgak to make sure that the way was safe Gravgak was supposed to keep an eye on the line of floating trees that had taken flight down the hillside. Danger still lurked there, we knew. And now the siren that had frightened off the attack was silent. Our ship, locked against invaders, could be forgotten. We were guests of Tomboldo.

Gravgak was our guard, but he didn't work at it. He was too anxious to hear all the talk. In the excitement of our meeting, everyone ignored the growing darkness, the lurking dangers. Gravgak confronted us with agitated jabbering:

"Wollo - yeeta - vo - vandartch - vandartch! Grr - see - o - see - o - see - o!"

"See - o - see - o - see - o," one of the others echoed.

It began to make sense. They wanted us to repeat the siren noises. The enemy had threatened their lives. There could very well have been a wholesale slaughter. But as long as we could make the "see - o - see - o" we were all safe.

Split and I exchanged glances. He touched his hand to the equipment jacket, to remind me we were armed with something more miraculous than a yowling siren.

"See - o - see - o - see - o!" Others of Tomboldo's party echoed the demand. They must have seen the sponge trees again moving toward our path. "See - o - see - o!"

Our peaceful march turned into a spasm of terror. The sponge trees came rushing up the slope, as if borne by a sudden gust of wind. They bounced over our path, and the war party spilled out of them.

Shouting. A wild swinging of clubs. And no cat-and-mouse tricks. No deliberate circling and closing in. An outright attack. Naked bodies gleaming in the semi-darkness. Arms swinging weapons, choosing the nearest victims. The luminous rocks on the ends of the clubs flashed. Shouting, screeching, hurling their clubs. The whizzing fury filled the air.

I hurled a capsule bomb. It struck at the base of a bouncing sponge tree, and blew the thing to bits.

The attackers ran back into a huddle, screaming. Then they came forward, rushing defiantly.

Our muscular guard, Gravgak was too bold. He had picked up one of their clubs and he ran toward their advance, and to all of Tomboldo's party it must have appeared that he was bravely rushing to his death. Yet the gesture of the club he swung so wildly could have been intended as a warning! It could have meant, Run back, you fools, or these strange devils will throw fire at you

I threw fire. And so did my lieutenant. He didn't wait for orders, thank goodness. He knew it was their lives or ours. Zip, zip, zip — BLANG-BLANG-BLANG! The bursts of fire at their feet ripped the rocks. The spray caught them and knocked them back. Three or four warriors in the fore ranks were torn up in the blasts. Others were flattened— and those who were able, ran.

They ran, not waiting for the cover of sponge-trees. Not bothering to pick up their clubs.

But the operation was not a complete success. We had suffered a serious casualty. The guard Gravgak. He had rushed out too far, and the first blast of fire and rock had knocked him down. Now Tomboldo and others of the party hovered over him.

His eyes opened a little. I thought he was staring at me, drilling me with suspicion. I worked over him with medicines. The crowd around us stood back in an attitude of awe as Split and I applied ready bandages, and held a stimulant to his nostrils that made him breath back to consciousness.

Suddenly he came to life. Lying there on his back, with the club still at his fingertips, he swung up on one elbow. The swift motion caused a cry of joy from the crowd. I heard a little of it — and then blacked out. For as the muscular Gravgak moved, his fingers closed over the handle of the club. It whizzed upward with him — apparently all by accident. The stone that

dangled from the end of the club crashed into my head.

I went into instant darkness. Darkness, and a long, long silence.

4.

Vauna, the beautiful daughter of Tomboldo, came into my life during the weeks that I lay unconscious.

I must have talked aloud much during those feverish hours of darkness.

"Campbell!" I would call out of a nightmare. "Campbell, we're about to land. Is everything set? Check the instruments again, Campbell."

"S-s-sh!" The low hush of Split Campbell's voice would somehow penetrate my dream.

The voices about me were soft. My dreams echoed the soft female voices of this new, strange language.

"Campbell, are you there? . . . Have you forgotten the Code, Campbell?"

"Quiet, Captain."

"Who is it that's swabbing my face? I can't see."

"It's Vauna. She's smiling at you, Captain. Can't you see her?"

"Is this the pretty one we saw through the telescope?"

"One of them."

"And what of the other? There were two together. I remember —"

"Omosla is here too. She's Vauna's attendant. We're all looking after you, Captain Linden. Did you know I performed an operation to relieve the pressure on your brain? You must get well, Captain." The words of Campbell came through insistently.

After a silence that may have lasted for hours or days, I said, "Campbell, you haven't forgot the EGGWE Code?"

"Of course not, Captain."

"Section Four?"

"Section Four," he repeated in a low voice, as if to pacify me and put me to sleep. "Conduct of EGGWE agents toward native inhabitants: A, No agent shall enter into any diplomatic agreement that shall be construed as binding —"

I interrupted. "Clause D?"

He picked it up. "D, no agent shall enter into a marriage contract with any native. . . H-m-m. You're not trying to warn me, are you, Captain Linden? Or are you warning yourself?"

At that moment my eyes opened a little. Swimming before my blurred vision was the face of Vauna. I did remember her — yes, she must have haunted my dreams, for now my eyes burned in an effort to define her features more clearly. This was indeed Vauna, who had been one of the party of twelve, and had walked beside her father in the face of the attack. Deep within my subconscious the image of her beautiful face and figure had lingered. I murmured a single word of answer to Campbell's question. "Myself."

In the hours that followed, I came to know the soft footsteps of Vauna. The caverns in which she and her father and all these Benzendella people lived were pleasantly warm and fragrant. My misty impressions of their life about me were like the first impressions of a child learning about the world into which he has been born.

Sometimes I would hear Vauna and her attendant Omosla talking together. Often when Campbell would stop in this part of the cavern to inquire about me, Omosla would drop in also. She and Campbell were learning to converse in simple words. And Vauna and I — yes. If I could only avoid blacking out.

I wanted to see her.

So often my eyes would refuse to open. A thousand nightmares. Space ships shooting through meteor swarms. Stars like eyes. Eyes like stars. The eyes of Vauna, the daughter of Tomboldo. The sensitive stroke of Vauna's fingers, brushing my forehead, pressing my hand.

I gained my health gradually.

"Are you quite awake?" Vauna would ask me in her musical Benzendella words. "You speak better today. Your friend Campbell has brought more recordings of our language, so you can learn to speak more. My father is eager to talk with you. But you must sleep more. You are still weak."

It gave me a weird sensation to awaken in the night, trying to adjust myself to my surroundings. The Benzendellas were sleep-singers. By night they murmured mysterious little songs through their sleep. Strange harmonies whispered through the caves.

And if I stirred restlessly, the footsteps of Vauna might come to me through the darkness. In her sleeping garments she would come to me, faintly visible in the pink light that filtered through from some corridor. She would whisper melodious Benzendella words and tell me to go back to sleep, and I would drift into the darkness of my endless dreams.

The day came when I awakened to see both Vauna and her father standing before me. Stern old Tomboldo, with his chalk-smooth face and not a hint of an eyebrow or eyelash, rapped his hand against my ribs, shook the fiber bed lightly, and smiled. From a pocket concealed in his flowing cape, he drew forth the musical watch, touched the button, and played. "Trail of Stars."

"I have learned to talk," I said.

"You have had a long sleep."

"I am well again. See, I can almost walk." But as I started to rise, the wave of blackness warned me, and I restrained my ambition. "I will walk soon."

"We will have much to talk about. Your friend has pointed to the stars and told me a strange story of your coming. We have walked around the ship. He has told me how it rides through the sky. I can hardly make myself believe." Tomboldo's eyes cast upward under the strong ridge of forehead where the eyebrows should have been. He was evidently trying to visualize the flight of a space ship. "We will have much to tell each other."

"I hope so," I said. "Campbell and I came to learn about the serpent river." I resorted to my own language for the last two words, not knowing the Benzendella equivalent. I made an eel-like motion with my arm. But they didn't understand. And before I could explain, the footsteps of other Benzendellas approached, and presently I looked around to see that quite an audience had gathered. The most prominent figure of the new group was the big muscular guard of the black and green diamond markings—Gravgak.

"You get well?" Gravgak said to me. His eyes drilled me closely.

"I get well," I said.

"The blow on the head," he said, "was not meant."

I looked at him. Everyone was looking at him, and I knew this was meant to be an occasion of apology. But the light of fire in Vauna's eyes told me that she did not believe. He saw her look, and his own eyes flashed darts of defiance. With an abrupt word to me, he wheeled and started off. "Get well!"

The crowd of men and women made way for him. But in the arched doorway he turned. "Vauna. I am ready to speak to you alone."

She started I reached and barely touched her hand. She stopped. "I will talk with you later, Gravgak."

"Now!" he shouted. "Alone."

He stalked off. A moment later Vauna, after exchanging a word with her father, excused herself from the crowd and followed Gravgak.

From the way those in the room looked, I knew this must be a dramatic moment. It was as if she had acknowledged Gravgak as her master — or her lover. He had called for her She had followed.

But her old father was still the master. He stepped toward the door. "Vauna! . . . Gravgak! . . . Come back."

(I will always wonder what might have happened if he hadn't called them! Was my distrust of Gravgak justified? Had I become merely a jealous lover — or was I right in my hunch that the tall muscular guard was a potential traitor?)

Vauna reappeared at once. I believe she was glad that she had been called back.

Gravgak came sullenly. At the edge of the crowd in the arched doorway he stood scowling.

"While we are together," old Tomboldo said quietly, looking around at the assemblage, "I must tell you the decision of the council. Soon we will move back to the other part of the world."

There were low murmurs of approval through the chamber.

"We will wait a few days," Tomboldo went on, "until our new friend —" he pointed to me — "is well enough to travel. We would never leave him here to the mercy of the savage ones. He and his helper came through the sky in time to save us from being destroyed. We must never forget this kindness. When we ascend the **Kao-Wagwattl**, the ever moving **rope of life**, these friends shall come with us. On the back of the Kao-Wagwattl **they shall ride with us across the land.**"

5.

From that moment on, there was more buzzing around the caverns than a hive of bees. It was like a spaceport before the blastoff of a big interplanetary liner. The excitement was enough to cause a sick man to have a relapse — or get well in a hurry to join in on the commotion. I did my best to get well quick!

"Where is Campbell? Bring me my friend Campbell, please."

Omosla, the pretty attendant and companion of Vauna, was always glad, I noticed, to be sent on an errand to Split Campbell, wherever he was.

From all reports he was reinforcing the defenses at one point or another where these caverns led up to the surface. They told me he was a busy man. The attacks of the savage ones had grown more vicious They had evidently learned that the Benzendellas intended to move back to other lands; so they had grown bold in their raids, attempting to steal not only the Benzendellas' treasurers but also their women. They had not been successful. My good lieutenant, navigator and scientist equipped with capsule explosives, had blown one group of them into a fountain of dismembered arms and legs. I could just picture him hurling those miniature bombs at the split-second when they would create the most panic.

The Benzendellas had been quick

to recognize a good thing. They only wished he were quadruplets or better, to stand guard continuously at many entrances. They brought him their rare foods, and furnished him with a comfortable couch; they offered him gifts In short, they loved him for his efficiency, and for himself. Especially (according to the rumors that reached my ears) Omosla.

Pretty little Omosla, I fear, loved him with a love that might have overwhelmed a lesser man. But I knew that Split Campbell would not be swerved. He was devoted to duty, dignity, and the Code. The Code forbade intermarriage with the natives.

Why did I keep thinking of the Code? It shouldn't have crossed my thoughts so often. I hardly dared stop to ask myself what continually brought it to mind. But I knew. The flare of jealously I had felt when Gravgak had tried to call Vauna away from the crowd. . .

"You are feeling better, Captain?" Vauna said to me as she watched me pace the floor. "You find that you can walk, so you keep walking?"

"I need to walk so I can think."

"If you wish to think, you should sit out on the hillside at the time of sunset. You understand my words?"

"I understand," I smiled. Then, rashly, I added, "I understand your words. I don't always understand you."

"And you wish to understand me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

I could think of more answers than my vocabulary could handle. I said simply, "When I go back to my own world I should be able to say that I understand the people of this world."

"But you **do** understand us. You see how we live. You hear how we talk. There." She pressed my hand. "That is all you need to understand, isn't it? I am the one who does not understand you."

"How do you mean?"

"I do not see how you live. I do not hear how you talk." She gave a little laugh. "Only see how you walk when you think, but I do not know what you think."

"I think about you," I said.

"That is very nice. I think about you, too, Jim. Since the night you saved us from the savage ones, I have thought about you."

I stopped walking in circles and looked at her. The soft light from the luminous rock walls gave an ivory tint to her bare shoulders. She wore a dress of soft woven material, designed with a diagonal line of little hand-painted sponge trees. From the curve of her breasts to the lithe gracefulness of her thighs, the close-fitting garment accentuated her beauty.

She was backing away from me, smiling as if wondering if I would follow her. Her arms were bare except for the ornaments of fur around her elbows. These were evidently an insignia of Benzendella womanhood, for no woman of this realm was to be seen without them.

"Come," Vauna said, beckoning me. "Put your ear against the wall. What do you hear?"

She pressed her head against the wall and I did the same. Finally I made out the faint vibrations of some distant rumbling. I asked, "What is it?"

"Kao-Wagwattl."

"The round river that moves like a serpent?"

"It is an endless rope," she said. "It is life."

"Life?"

"It gathers water and food within

itself. It gives life to those who seek life. It gives life —"

She stopped, and her pretty poetic expression vanished. My hands touched her hands, my fingers moved gently along her wrists, her forearms — then as my touch neared her fur-covered elbows, a look of shock came into her eyes. "Jim!"

"Yes, Vauna?"

"I was trying to tell you —"

"What?"

For a moment she only looked at me, searching my eyes. "We don't understand each other, do we?"

Finally I said, "Then why don't we ask each other questions?"

"Yes...Yes, ask me questions."

"All right." I had an impulse to start pacing again. I walked about for a moment. "Tell me, Vauna. When your friend Gravgak demanded that you come and talk with him alone, what would have happened if your father hadn't called you back?"

She smiled faintly. "I will tell you a secret, Jim. I had already made my father promise to call me back. I whispered to him, 'Call me back.'"

"Why?"

She gave an evasive little laugh. "You understand enough already. Now it is my question. Tell me, Captain Jim, why do you keep saying that you are going back to another world?"

"Because I am That's my duty."

"When you ride with us on the Kao-Wagwattl you will come with us to another part of this world. It is more beautiful than here We are only a few. Our race lives in the other part. My father came here only to study, but soon the Kao-Wagwattl will take us all back. And you and your friend Campbell will go with us and belong to us."

The self-discipline of an EGGWE agent is supposed to be his defense against any natives' invitations, no matter how beautiful or charming the native. All I could say was, "You don't understand us, do you, Vauna?"

"Don't I?"

"Your people I love. And you, Vauna. But our orders are to return. I must not think of disobeying my orders. And I assure you Campbell is one who would never disobey."

"The big silver shell will take you away from us?"

"Yes."

"You will remember me?"

"Yes, always."

"Thank you, Jim." She was weeping. I started to take her in my arms, but thought better of it. She dried her eyes. "I will remember you too. When I see Campbell and Omosla, I will have a dream of this hour, and how we didn't understand."

I was quick to make a correction. "You'll not be seeing Campbell. I'll have to take him back with me, you know."

"No, he will be here. It is our rule that he should stay."

"Why?"

"Because he has become the mate of our girl, Omosla."

I looked at her, not believing I had heard her words correctly. A fever swept my brain. In my own language I said harshly, "It's a lie! Campbell would never violate —"

"I do not understand your words," Vauna said softly.

Then in my broken Benzendella accents I asserted, calmly but decisively, "I don't believe what you say. I don't believe that Campbell has become the mate of Omosla."

"You will believe," Vauna said, "when Omosla's baby is born."

I had already sent for Campbell. Mentally I chastized myself for having sent Omosla. For if what I had been told was true, his life had become complicated enough already. (I must admit that for the moment I had something less than proper consideration for her.)

Omosla didn't return from the errand for Campbell. Maybe the news of my concern for him had frightened her away. One of her friends told me that Campbell was out on the surface somewhere; that he couldn't be located just now. When he returned they would send him to me.

I then sought the counsel of Tomboldo.

"It can't be true, this story about Campbell," I said. "There's been some mistake."

Tomboldo's answer was soft spoken. "Much has happened. You have been ill for many weeks. You must take our word. Do you find the news not to your liking? Omosla is a devoted girl. And if our hero Campbell became her husband, all of us would be proud."

There was no use talking of the EGGWE Code to him, that was plain. All I could say at the moment was, "I'll talk with Campbell."

For the next few nights, after the whole cavern city seemed to be asleep, I would walk forth a little distance. This was more than pacing. It was a test of my strength and my wits, and most of all my confidence that I would not black out. It was proof to myself that I was a well man again. It was a willful act of striking out on my own purposes. I would find Campbell.

Each night I ventured a little farther. The artificial lights burned low. All was quiet. The luminous rock walls stared out from among the cavern furnishings. I walked steadily. I was getting used to the planet's stronger gravity. I was learning to like the sandals they had given me to wear, cushioned with shreds of sponge-tree vegetation.

Tonight as always I walked to the right from the arch, through one of Tomboldo's rooms, and on past the storage rooms. The way opened into a long amber-lighted tunnel. The city branched off in little tunneled avenues from this passageway. Would Campbell be found on guard tonight — this way — or this way — or —

I heard light footsteps, sounds of two persons somewhere in the distance. I moved back toward Tomboldo's part of the cave to wait until the ways had cleared.

Two men were coming through the corridor, conversing in low whispers.

I moved back into the shadows, scarcely breathing.

The glow of amber light from the corridor revealed them, silhouetted. The taller man was driving the smaller one ahead of him, threatening him with a short-bladed knife.

They slowed their steps. Their low whispers were audible.

"If you breathe a word I'll rip you." The agitated words of the tall guard, Gravgak. The light revealed the lines of green-and-black diamonds painted on his thighs.

The smaller man, also a guard, muttered, "Have I ever told anything?"

"You understand, then," said Gravgak. "If anything happens, you'll swear there was an intruder — one of the savages."

"I'll swear it. I'll say that I —"

"Say that he knocked you down and forced his way in. Like this!"

Gravgak struck him with his fist. The guard tumbled in a heap against the cavern wall. He lay there, eyes closed. Gravgak tiptoed past my hiding place. His eyes glinted with purpose. He paused at Tomboldo's door, weighed the knife in his hand, then sheathed it. He went on toward Vauna's room.

I skipped to one side of the storage room where I had seen my equipment coat hanging. Without it I could have been no match for this man. My fingers caught it off the wall, I got into it as I hurried back. Automatically my hands checked the contents, everything in place —

Gravgak was conversing with Vauna through the partly opened door. "I told you I would come."

"You have no right. I told you—" There was strength, not fear, in Vauna's low voice.

"Your father means for me to win you, if necessary by force."

"You lie. Go or I'll sound the alarm."

"You are in love with that stranger." His voice trembled with rage. "See, you don't answer. If you want him to live, get rid of him. Send him back in his silver shell."

"You threaten my father's guest?"

"The great Tomboldo will not live long. I have heard the savages plan to come in some night soon and murder him."

At that instant old Tomboldo's voice sounded from the next room. "Who's there, Vauna?"

"Gravgak!" It was Gravgak himself who answered. "I came to protect you, Tomboldo. There's danger - -"

Tomboldo's voice thundered with anger at this unaccountable intrusion. "What do you mean?"

"They mean to kill you, and if they do - -"

"Who?"

"The savages. And if they succeed, I am your successor. Tell your daughter it's so. Tell her that if a knife blade descends from some dark corner - - **look out!** Someone behind you!"

It was a ruse to cause old Tomboldo to whirl about and turn his back to Gravgak. Tomboldo didn't whirl. But he must have seen what I saw, glittering in the dim light - - the knife in Gravgak's hand. It flashed up - -

I flung a capsule bomb at the arch. Fire flashed, and the voices were swallowed up in the concussion.

7.

The swirl of yellow dust sifted through the cavern passages. Coughing and puffing hard, I fought my way into the heap - - in time to catch sight of Gravgak staggering off toward an exit tunnel.

The three of us stood together. A strange trio. Two Benzendellas, one Earth man. Bound together in an allegiance that all the space in the universe could never divide. Vauna was weeping softly, holding her arms tight about herself, her hands cupped over the fur wrappings of her elbows.

She said she could not understand Gravgak's behavior. Once he had had a chance to become the leader. Was it all because he was insane with jealousy - - because she loved me?

Her father thought it was more than this. He had evidently read signs of disloyalty in Gravgak, even before my coming. Too many plans had filtered out to the savage enemies. For a long time Gravgak had been impatient for a chance to succeed Tomboldo; my coming had

thwarted the original plan -- the murderous attack on the sunset meeting. Yes, Gravgak had been twisting the sponge-tree bands into his own schemes even then.

The fine boldness showed in Tomboldo's eyes as he talked. People had gathered, and they saw clearly the truth of his charges.

But now there were delays in getting ready to go to the better land on another side of this planet. Part of the delay was caution. Gravgak would probably lie in waiting for the Benzendella migration to the serpent river. He would plan an attack. Some waiting, some scouting and much preparation would be a matter of wisdom. Meanwhile, if Gravgak could be found, let him be killed on sight.

Several weeks passed. Secret preparations for the twenty mile migration were completed. I was pleased to hear that Campbell had had a share in these plans. He had made several night hikes back to the ship, and had kept watch through the telescope by day, and made valuable observations by means of infra-red photography by night. He knew where the nests of the savage bands were located. Moreover, I learned that he and a few of Tomboldo's choice scouts, under cover of darkness, crossed through the sponge-tree area to examine the Serpent River at close range and determine upon a suitable place for getting the Benzendella tribe aboard.

For these observations, and for an abundance of scientific data which he picked up about the Serpent River itself, I was deeply grateful. If this expedition succeeded in its purposes, the success would be to his credit, not mine.

Nevertheless, when I was at last conducted to his quarters at the end of one of the tunnels - - my long awaited visit - - I did not spend all my time complimenting him for his fine achievements.

"You're going to be ready to make the trip with the tribe, I presume?" I asked, when we got around to the plans for the migration.

"And leave the ship here? I shall follow orders, Captain, but I should prefer to stay with the ship, and to proceed with the remainder of the scientific assignments."

He handed his field glasses over to one of the relief guards, and led me to a bench in his primitive quarters. A slice of sunlight knifed through from the out-of-doors, the first I had seen for a long time.

"A little sunlight's not a bad thing," I said casually. "I've been needing a little light."

He looked up at me as if he knew what was coming. "If you've been hearing a rumor, don't believe it."

"You've heard it too?"

"They say I'm supposed to become the husband of Omosla."

"All I want is your word, Lieutenant Campbell," I said.

"My word, Captain." Split said dryly. "You know I wouldn't break the Code."

"I believe you . . . Okay, we're in a spot. The fact is, the girl's going to have a baby. When she does, she'll declare you her mate. And the tribe will be proud. Have you thought this through?"

"I've tried to."

I began to pace. "You know we can't afford to offend the tribe. If you bluntly deny that you've had anything to do with the girl, they'll be insulted. They're ready to believe her, not you."

"How soon will the child be born?"

"Within a few days."

"How long have we been here?"

"Long enough."

"Why doesn't her true mate speak up, whoever he is?"

I said, "That's one of the strange circumstances. I haven't heard them mention any other man but you. You see, Split, you're the hero of the hour. You're the one they want."

"I hope you're not suggesting that I marry this girl."

"I haven't suggested it, have I? But I will ask this: Do you like the girl? . . . Love her?? . . . Enough to marry her?"

"Under more favorable conditions - -yes. I've never loved anybody before But Omosla - - from the first time I saw her, that evening, in the sunset - -"

"All right, Split. But you still tell me you haven't made love to her?"

"Absolutely, no. You may not know it, Jim, but I was with you almost constantly for days and nights after your knockout. You came through the operation - - the riskiest thing I ever tried in my life. When you began to pull out of it, I could have gladly taken you back to the ship and blasted off for home. But they were giving you care - - Vauna and Omosla - - and damned intelligent care, according to my orders. By that time the savages were knocking our doors again, and I wents onto the defense job with my pockets full of scare bombs, and the other kind too. From then on, I couldn't have held to tighter discipline if I'd been in a planetary war, I swear it."

I beat my fist lightly on Split's shoulder. The fellow was great, no doubt about it, and I felt like a fool asking him questions about matters outside the bounds of duty. "You're okay, Split. You could violate a hundred codes, as far as I'm concerned, and I'd swear before any court in the world that you're tops. But we've still got a problem with this tribe - - and this girl."

"I'm not asking for compliments," Split said. "For the record I'm telling you what **did** happen. and what didn't. And here's what did." Now it was his turn to pace twice around the bench. "How do I begin?"

"With Omosla."

"Omosla comes to me often. She brings me food and drink. She hangs around like a pet. She doesn't touch me - - anymore. I put a stop to that soon after the first time she put her arms around me. Yes, she did that. I was busy watching the sponge-trees move down the valley. She was nearby, murmuring words, most of which I could only half understand. I didn't stop her when she slipped her arms around me - - not for quite awhile. I remember plenty well the way those pins in her elbow furs scratched my arms. They stuck in like thorns. Look, you can still see the marks." He rolled up his sleeves to show me the slight scars on his upper arms, just above the elbows. "I figured either she didn't know those pins were sticking me, or else it was some sort of tricky test that girls use on men to test their metal. So I took it, and didn't wince. Sure, I was enjoying letting her hug me. But after that one time I always kept my distance. This all happened when we first came. You'd think she'd have forgotten. Especially if she had a real husband somewhere on the scene."

I groaned. "Every tribe has strange customs. When the baby comes, that's when they'll insist on a husband "

"I wonder who it really is."

"Unfortunately we can't prove anything by giving the baby a blood test. These primitives wouldn't un-

derstand."

"Proofs are out," Campbell said.

"However, we still have the eyelash test," I suggested.

"You mean - -"

"I mean that you and I are the only two human animals on this planet with eyebrows and eyelashes. When Omosla's baby arrives without a trace of an eyelash, that might go a long way toward convincing - -"

"You'll help me fight it, then?"

"If you're sure you don't want to change your mind, throw out the Code, and claim the girl."

A look of disdain was all the answer Campbell gave me, at first. Finally he said, "You'd had ample reasons for nicknaming me Split, Captain. But so far, I've given you no grounds for applying the term to my personality. I prefer to remain a member of EGGWE, in good standing, and to return to Earth with a clear record. Let Omosla name the true father, whoever he is."

8.

The whole Benzendella tribe made its way across to the Kao-Wagwattl with only one casualty reported. Leeger, the short, slight guard who had once been brutally knocked out by Gravgak, was reported missing.

Everyone else came through without a scratch. It was a triumph for old Tomboldo. His superhuman courage had carried the day. Children were delighted over the adventure. Old folks were happy over achieving what they had feared would be an impossible undertaking. They could believe, now, that they would live all through to the end of the journey - - for Kao-Wagwattl, the serpent river, was a legendary giver of life.

Campbell did not come. That was according to plan. He kept in touch with me by radio through the final hours of the twenty-mile crossing. " . . . Do you read me, Captain? I've drawn them to the north with fire bombs from the ship's guns . . . They've never guessed your course."

"No signs of Gravgak? Or Leeger?"

"Not a sign. The city's empty."

"Keep on the radio, Campbell."

"Right, Captain. By the way, how is Omosla?"

"Expecting. I'll let you know. She still talks about the bravest man on the planet, someone named Campbell."

"H-m-m. You'll sort of look after her, won't you?"

It was two hours before dawn when the last of the tribe (Leeger excepted) gathered at the mountainside station to board Kao-Wagwattl. We waited for daylight. Strange smells filled our nostrils. Smells of wood fires, sparked to life by friction under the pressures of the crawling monster. Smells of rocks being ground to powder. Smells of the saccharine-sweet breathing from the pores of the thing itself, the giant Kao-Wagwattl.

The faint gray of dawn gradually changed to pink. In the growing light we could make out the contour of the vast misty creeping form. Its rounded sides moved along only yards from where we stood. As the light of morning came on we could distinguish the i m m e n s e box-shaped scales that covered its sides. Clouds of sponge-trees rose and fell around it. Unrooted vegetation would sift downward, to be humped into the air again, or to be rolled under. Small fires were continually being ignited by friction, and often smothered before they were well

started. Sometimes the burning would creep up around the curved sides, only to be snuffed out by the surface-breathing of the massive thing.

I was relieved to note that the curved top -- the "spine", so to speak -- was so gradually rounded that there could be no danger of anyone's falling off. Its immensity had to be seen to be appreciated.

As to its length, I took the word of Tomboldo and others. It was endless. It wound around the whole planet like a fifty-thousand mile serpent that had swallowed its own tail. An unbroken rope of life, forever crawling.

A gigantic creature? A gargantuan vine? A living thing! I should not say that it was more animal than plant. When I asked Tomboldo's counsellors, Was it animal or vegetable, their answer was, Yes. Yes, what? Yes, it was animal or vegetable. They stressed the OR. Must it be one and not the other? Evidently the Kao-Wagwattl was not to be compared, not to be classified, but to be accepted -- and utilized.

For this wandering tribe it was a means of escape from enemies, and a mode of travel. With the coming of daylight, they went to work.

Crude cranes. Swinging baskets. Hoists. One group after another was tossed up into the rubbery purplish-gray scales that covered the Kao-Wagwattl's spine.

No one cried out. The landing was soft. And harmless. The speed of the crawl was not great. It must have averaged not more than ten or fifteen miles an hour. But there were variations, to be taken advantage of. The outsides of a curve moved swiftly. Foresighted Tomboldo had selected the inside of a curve for our mounting, where the movement was sluggish. Younger members could leap across from an overhanging platform. Once safely in the folds of the surface, they could climb the rounded wall at their leisure.

Three or four hours were required for the entire tribe to get aboard. This meant that a long line was formed. Over a span of many miles this headless, tailless serpent became inhabited with tiny human fleas, figuratively speaking.

Among the stragglers who boarded last were a few older persons who had to be coaxed and pampered before they would get into the swinging basket.

Then, too, there was Omosla, looking very pretty and thoroughly frightened. She caused a slight delay at the very last by deciding it was time for her to have her baby.

9.

Finally we were all aboard, and the mighty Kao-Wagwattl, unaffected by this addition of a few specks of human dust, moved on at its dogged pace through the mountain valleys.

No lives had been lost. No one had been seriously injured. Tomboldo was the heroic leader. I went forward over the lumpy slabs of scales, to find him and congratulate him. He said, "The glad feelings are to be shared," and he spoke with high praise of my own help and that of my friend Campbell. "But we are not yet out of danger. Pass the word."

Pass the word. Keep down. Out of sight. For several days we would be crawling through the lands of savages.

Vauna found me. She had made sure that Omosla and the baby

would have the best of care, and now she meant to look after me. "My dear one," she called me.

"Here, my dear one. I have your valuable coat. Come out of sight. The enemy must not see you."

I glanced up the long curved spine of Kao, moving steadily through the sunshine. Little groups of Benzendellas could be seen ahead, as far as the eye could reach. The young children of the party had never had such a trip before, and the older ones found it a strenuous game to keep them down out of sight. Following Tomboldo's order, they rapidly ducked down into hiding The great rubber-like scales resembled up-ended boxes, set in criss-cross rows. The deep flexible crevices thus formed were ideal for hiding

I needed my radio. I must talk with Campbell. Vauna had taken my coat.

She called to me "Come, my dear one." She slipped down into a crevice a little to one side of the crest. "Come. I hear the voice of your friend Campbell in the box."

"I'm coming. Speak to him, Vauna. Tell him to wait."

"Shall I tell him the news?"

I didn't answer. The vertical surfaces of the scales folded together, parted, folded again, with the motions of the great creature, and for a moment I lost sight of Vauna. But I could hear her voice as I fought my way down to her hiding place. She was talking through the radio with Campbell.

"You are safe on the big silver ship? . . . Yes, we are on Kao-Wagwattl. I have been looking after Omosla . . ."

I could hear the eagerness in Campbell's voice as he asked about Omosla. Vauna answered him in accents of joy. "She has had her baby . . . A little girl! Very beautiful. Already she looks like you. **She has precious little lines of hair on her eyelids, and above her eyes, just like yours.**"

The damage was done! There was no point in my lying to Campbell to spare his feelings. Her words were the simple innocent truth. She was happy and proud to tell the wonderful news. Her words implied that Campbell would of course come and join us when his work was done, so he could be Omosla's husband, as all the Benzendellas expected.

About all I could say to Campbell was, "What she says is true, Split. It's a beautiful baby. Any father should be proud. I have nothing to add."

For hours afterward I could think of nothing else. I sat hidden among the deep soft scales, listening. Now and then the gentle movement would cause the crevices around me to gape open, wide enough to reveal a strip of sky. I wondered if sometime I might catch sight of a space ship bolting off into the blue. The only sounds I heard were the faint muffled rumblings of the Kao-Wagwattl moving along, like gentle thunder echoing up from somewhere down in the earth. It lulled me into relaxation, yet I could not dispel the mental image of Campbell sitting there in the ship, alone, brooding over the news. And tempted, no doubt, to touch the controls and leave this planet behind him.

Later I talked with him again, but we did not mention Omosla. He said he was busy with his scientific findings. I relayed to him descriptions of the Kao-Wagwattl - - the "inside" story, from one who was concealed within its scales. We were back to our original assignment, now. For days and days to come, we

pursued the scientific facts, comparing notes by radio.

At air-cruise speed, Campbell made trips around the planet, and completed his charts and maps. He reported that the beautiful land toward which we were moving was indeed a land of promise. But he gave slower estimates of the Kao-Wagwatti's speed, and he estimated that it would take us the larger part of a year to reach our destination. However, he managed to get an inside view of the larger Benzendella tribes who dwelt there. They were truly waiting for old Tomboldo's return, and were firm in their faith that the rope of life, Kao-Wagwattl, would bring him.

Such were the scientific and ethnological studies that Campbell and I were to share, by radio, in the weeks and months to come. . .

Now Vauna was beside me. We, like the others, were settled down for the long journey.

Innocent Vauna! She was trying so hard to please me. She sat very close, whispering to me.

I listened, and smiled, and tried to take my thoughts away from the image of Campbell, his honor shattered by her recent words to him about the baby — a baby with eyelashes — a baby that resembled him

If I remained silent, Vauna would tease me into talking with her. "Do my words displease you, Captain?"

"Your words please me very much."

"You do not look at me. You only look away. Do you want me to sit close beside you?"

I drew her in my arms and held her. In silence I thought a thousand thoughts that I had brought with me across millions of miles of space.

Later I said to her, "Your arms are warm. Why don't you take these fur things off your elbows, to be more comfortable?"

She smiled, and kissed me as I had taught her to kiss. "You want me to?" And she removed the furry white elbow ornaments. It was very strange . . . While we hovered close, she whispered to me of the secrets of life on this planet, unlike any other world I had known. And there were curious legends of Kao-Wagwatti, things she had carried in her heart to tell me if such a time as this should ever come.

As she talked, the pressure of the scale walls around us increased The great Kao-Wagwattl was evidently moving through a dip, so that its upper surfaces were compressed. There was no lack of air for breathing, but the darkness and the pressure added strangeness to the sensation. The tightness of Vauna's arms against my own caused my head to spin. Perhaps it was the fever returning from my recent illness. My arms felt the stinging sensation of being penetrated by needles. My thoughts flicked back to something Split Campbell had once told me . . .

Later, when the Kao curved over a summit, and the patches of sunlight dashed in, I suggested that Vauna go forward to see about her father. She answered me with a curious smile. I snuggled deeper into the shade of the scales and slept. Hours later, when I awakened, she was again beside me.

10.

If Omosla's baby had been a boy, I believe that old Tomboldo would have named it for the highest honor in the Benzendella world. He was searching for a successor. Not among the grown-up warriors and

counsellors. Among the infants. He sought a child favored by nature. Omosla was a beauty and a court favorite, even though she had been a servant. And Campbell, who was considered to be her mate, (though marriage had been delayed by circumstances) was of course a renowned hero. If the child had only been a boy!

I was kept busy reporting the reasons for Campbell's absence. He had stayed with our ship to guarantee Benzendella safety. Yes, it was true that he could fly through the air and catch up with us But there were duties which kept him away

My excuses wore thin. Vauna and her father begged me to tell him, over the radio, that Omosla was growing into a person of sorrow. The shadow of tragedy hovered over her.

I complied. I talked, by radio, with Campbell He was in another part of the land, now, pursuing the purposes for which we had come. My mention of Omosla's plight aroused his defiance. He said he would rather be a deserter than serve a captain who did not accept his word. "For the last time. Captain Linden, I repeat that I am not the mate of Omosla. Do you believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe," I said.

His radio clicked off.

Vauna and her father and I secluded ourselves among the scales and talked. My one question was, Could there have been any other person among them who had come from another planet?

"You and Campbell. No others."

"How can you be sure?" I pursued. "Suppose someone from my world wished to pass for a native. Suppose he should pluck the hairs from his eyelids and cut away his eyebrows. Would you know him to be an outsider?"

"Come," Vauna said. "We'll walk from one end of the tribe to the other."

While the great endless Kao-Wagwattl carried us on, through deep valleys and across wide plains, Vauna and I went about, day by day, studying the looks of each male member of the tribe.

I scrutinized the eyes of each. I listened to the native enunciations. I got acquainted with each man by name and personality. Vauna's friendship to all was a help. Through her I began to gain a bond of affection for all these people, deep and solid. Their ways became natural to me. In the night their sleep-singing could be heard, welling up softly through the scales within which they rested. In the mornings one could see the parties of agile ones gathering food and liquid fruits that rolled within reach along the sides of the moving Kao.

We crossed a series of islands. For long spaces there would be danger of dips under the surfaces of waters. We would close ourselves tightly within the waterproof interstices until the danger had passed. Later, when the slimy surfaces of the scales had dried off, we would emerge.

And now, out of a chance conversation, I learned of another danger which had been with us all along. Gravgak was also on the Kao-Wagwattl.

"How did you know this?" I asked Vauna sharply.

"Didn't my father tell you? I received a warning soon after we began the journey."

"Warning — from whom?"

"From Leeger."

"Leeger! I thought he was miss-

ing."

"He reappeared. He had known of our plan. He had boarded, somewhere. He was back there, beyond the end of our party. He shouted the warning to me. That is why you and I moved up the line, and have kept ourselves hidden."

"He shouted a warning to you—"

"That Gravgak is also on board, looking for me."

11.

Weeks earlier, a search party had given up. It had all happened quietly. Tomboldo had kept a few of his top scouts on the job (as I now learned) and for months after our journey had begun they had scoured the scaly surfaces of Kao-Wagwattl, looking in vain for Gravgak

Could we rest assured, then, that Gravgak had been bluffed out? That he had given up his purpose of trying to take Vauna? That he had long since climbed off the Kao-Wagwattl and gone back home?

We hoped so. Nevertheless we moved cautiously as our searches took us back through the long line of Benzendellas.

Then, without warning, we suddenly came upon Leeger. He saw us from a distance of fifty yards or less. We had come to the end of our tribe's settlement — evidently beyond the end; for in the last quarter of a mile we had found no persons dwelling among the scales.

"He motioned to us," Vauna said. "I'm sure it was Leeger."

But Leeger had disappeared from view Back of us now was the wilderness of scales, their curved surface glistening and alive with color as the endless crawling spine followed us out of the distant blue haze. Miles of Kao-Wagwattl, and nothing showing on the surface.

We were down, now, almost out of sight, yet peering over. Suddenly the form of Leeger bobbed up again, only a few feet from us.

"Go back!" Leeger cried, flinging a hand at us. "Go back! He's coming!"

It all happened in less time than it can be told. Leeger rose up to warn us. We saw the knife fly through the air at him. He fell with the blade through his throat.

On the instant we saw the dark muscular form of Gravgak rearing up among the scales. The green-and-black diamond-shaped markings on his arms and legs glinted in the light. He had hurled his knife true. Triumph shone in his murderous eyes. He had killed the man who had stalked him to protect Vauna and Tomboldo. And now he must have believed that one of his prizes was within easy reach.

His arm flashed upward. It held one of those rockstrung clubs that the savages used so skillfully.

The weighted club whizzed through the air. I swung Vauna off her feet. I'll swear the rolling movement of Kao-Wagwattl helped me or I wouldn't have succeeded. We tumbled into the crevice.

Then I scrambled upward. Another glimpse of Gravgak. He dived down among the crevices, moving in our direction. A moment of darkness. The scale-tops closed out the light. When they opened, he was there, coming at us.

I locked with him. We fought. The movement of the surfaces gave us an upward thrust. I kicked and tumbled to the surface. He caught my wrist, but the upthrust of the Kao favored me and I jerked him upward, onto the top of the scales.

We fought in the open. The rubbery footing was deadly, but it play-

ed no favorites. I struck a heavy blow that made the green-and-black lined arms shudder. Gravgak's eyes flashed as he plunged back at me. I struck him again, with the full force of my body. He bounced and tumbled. He rolled out of sight. But not for long. It was an intentional trick. He disappeared in the crevice where Leeger had fallen. When he came up, the bloody knife was in his hand. I heard Vauna's warning cry.

I leaped down into the crevice. She was trying to get my coat. She knew there were explosives in it, if she could only get them into my hands.

No time for that. Gravgak leaped down at me. The knife was rigid from his hand, coming down with a plunge. I kicked back, floundering against the tricky walls of the scales, and Gravgak fell down deep where I had been. I saw it happen. A sight I never expect to see sepeated.

His descent to the base of the scales, where the walls joined, might have been a harmless fall. Yet who knows how sensitive is the material of the vast living thing called Kao-Wagwattl? The knife plunged into deep **Kao flesh** beneath our feet. The flesh opened. Gravgak whirled, tried to escape the opening. His arm twisted under him. And went down. As if something drew it. His back — his whole body, from hips to shoulders — was caught in the gaping hole that he had seemingly opened with a plunge of the knife blade. It closed on him. It severed him. Part of him was gone. Before our eyes there remained his legs, cut clean away. And his head, and part of one shoulder.

The rest of him? It would not return to sight. Kao-Wagwattl was a living thing. When it wished it could devour.

Many of the tribe came back to this spot to examine what remained of the traitorous guard. I too observed him closely. I examined his eyes with a glass. Also the eyes of the murdered Leeger. Neither showed any traces of eyelashes or eyebrows.

12.

The tribe rode on tranquilly. There would be new legends of Kao-Wagwattl, after what had occurred. Many were the stories, and I relayed them to Campbell, at the ship, who faithfully recorded them all.

There was a tragedy to be added. It could not have been otherwise. For some months the news of Omosla and her little daughter had been vague. It was the Benzendella tradition that weddings should not be delayed for long after the arrival of the first-born child. It was rumored that this young mother now faced the shame of having been left without a mate. It was hard to get exact information. Even though Vauna and I had always sought an understanding between us, some things were not talked about freely. Deepest, most important truths in new worlds are often the most elusive. Now I questioned Vauna closely, and I learned of the tragic end of Omosla.

"She and her baby are no longer with us," Vauna said quietly. "It happened one night when the stars seemed very close. They say she had studied the sky each night, wondering which of the worlds beyond was the world of Campbell."

"And then?"

"Two of her caretakers saw it happen, but they could not stop it. With the babe in her arms, she walked

over the side of Kao-Wagwattl. And went down. Under."

Vauna went on to tell me that Tomboldo had urged silence about it. He would always believe that the girl had lost faith too soon — that Campbell might have come back when his work was done. Moreover, Tomboldo felt that it was important to the morale of the tribe that both Campbell and I be held in high esteem.

When Vauna finished telling me these things, she said she would ask me the questions she had been saving for many days. "Did you believe, Jim, that you would find some other person among us from your world?"

"I didn't know."

"If you had found such a person, what would you have believed then?"

"That he, and not Campbell, was the father of Omosla's child."

"And what," Vauna asked, "are you going to believe about us when our child is born?"

13.

We were around on the other side of the planet by now. I estimated that we had traveled more than seven thousand hours.

By this time many things had happened. So much that I doubted my ability to convey all the news to Campbell so that he would get a clear understanding. I had lain awake nights trying to formulate my message. If my words failed, I only hoped that my tone of voice would convey my appreciation. My appreciation of him. Of what he had gone through. Of what he must yet go through.

He talked with me quietly through the radio, and I could visualize him as if I were sitting beside him again in the space ship.

"Yes, Linden. Go on. I'm listening."

I told him of the death of Omosla and the child. He was deeply grieved. It was a long time before he found voice to speak.

"Go ahead, Linden. I'm listening."

"I have more news," I said. "But tell me of yourself, Campbell. Have you gone ahead, playing your lone hand?"

"I've found my way into the customs of the savages, Linden. They have their own legends of Kao-Wagwattl. I can predict that in time the gap can be bridged between them and the Benzendellas, if we work carefully — men like you, Linden, working from within, and other agents from EGGWE that are sure to follow. I believe this planet can be spared the torments of great wars."

"Yes, Campbell . . . and you, personally . . . are you well? Are you still bristling with your usual self-discipline?"

"In case you have any doubts about the matter," his v o i c e was slightly caustic, "I haven't broken the Code."

"In Omosla's case I wish you had," I said.

"I wish it too," Campbell's voice came back, now in a lowered tone. "I loved Omosla. I would have been her mate, gladly."

"But you were, Campbell."

"Now, don't start that again, Linden, or I'll —"

"Wait, Campbell, don't cut me off. You must hear all of my news, first. Most important of all, old Tomboldo has chosen my own son to be his successor. He'll be groomed for the job all through his childhood, and I've decided to stay right here, Code or no Code, and see him through."

"Your son?" Campbell's voice was mostly breath. "Who are you talking

about?"

"Our baby — Vauna's and mine. It's several days old. Doing fine. Has eyebrows just like mine. Chalk-dust skin like hers."

Campbell blurted. "Do you mean to tell me that as soon as you and Vauna boarded the Kao —"

"The ways of life on this planet are something you and I ought to know about, Campbell. Listen closely —"

"Shoot!"

In words of one syllable I explained, then, what I had at last learned: that the human beings of this planet were not precisely like those of the Earth. They were unquestionably related, somewhere back down through the ages. But Nature had worked a significant change in the process by which new life could be started. Fertilization in the female was accomplished by her own action and her own preference. Nature had equipped her arms —

"Arms, did you say?" Campbell fairly shouted through the radio. "Go on."

I continued. Nature had equipped her arms, I explained, with tiny thorn-like projections which could penetrate the arms or sides of the male like needles. By this means she drew blood from his bloodstream. A very slight transfusion of male blood into the female bloodstream was the act that accomplished fertilization.

"You see, Campbell, woman does not bear a child except by her own premeditated choice," I explained. "You and I were puzzled by the elbow furs all these women wear. Now you see. It's a natural bit of extra clothing. The dictates of modesty."

"Well!" Campbell said. "Then you and I allowed ourselves —"

"We were simply chosen. Not knowing the score, we were innocent bystanders — well, more or less innocent — and pitifully ignorant. Unfortunately for us, these were matters the Benzendellas don't talk about freely."

Campbell paused for a moment of confused thinking. "Just a minute, Captain. I've been observing these savages — home life and all. There's no lack of normal affections among them, in our own sense of the word. They're equipped physically, just as we are — plus the arm thorns. They have the same organs, the same functions —"

"For purposes of affection, yes. But the arms — that's separate — for conception."

"Well I'll be blasted!" Campbell was speechless for a long moment. Then, "I think I'll go back to Earth."

I was not surprised at his decision. It was what I expected, what I would have advised. He had had more than one man's share of this planet, for one who didn't expect to take root here. But my own life here was just beginning.

I had thought it out. My guess was that my long record of service for the EGGWE could withstand some variation. An application for release would very likely win an approval, especially in view of my change to serve the EGGWE purposes even better by becoming a Benzendella.

When I announced this plan, by radio, to the new Captain Campbell, formerly known as Split, but now commonly referred to on this planet as the hero of the Benzendella migration, he said he was not surprised. "Congratulations, Linden, for knowing what you wanted. Stay aboard that Kao-Wagwatti. There's a beautiful land waiting for you up ahead."

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